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Reading and Writing Under the Sign of the Cross: a Post-theological Poetics of  
Agnosticism

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June 2000

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## Abstract

A post-theological poetics of agnosticism is a hermeneutical method that begins with a posture of “not-knowing” and uses the concepts of reading and writing, in conjunction with Derrida’s X, as metaphors for making sense of and meaning within the world as “text,” in addition to making sense of and meaning for my-self and an-other as “texts.” When I read and write texts, I do so under the sign of the cross so that I engage in both a constructive and de-constructive dialogical exchange, or X-change, which is an active and passive process that is ultimately the embodiment of love.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first two explicate my hermeneutical methodology: Chapter 1—“What do I read and write under the sign of the cross?” and Chapter 2—“How do I read and write under the sign of the cross?” Chapter 1 presents a text as an embodied entity that is “there too with” us and with whom I, as reader and writer, engage in an X-change. Chapter 2 defines three terms by which I may accomplish reading and writing under the sign of the cross: recognition, inter-action, inter-passion. The third is an application of my hermeneutical methodology and presentation of its workings through a reading and writing of a novel: Chapter 3—“Incarnation, or, the Drama of Becoming and Re-becoming (Human): A reading and writing of Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*.” Chapter 3 pulls themes from Winterson’s *Written* such as the necessity of re-membrance within a love relationship and the detrimental effects of authority within X-change. Incarnation is not a singular event but a process of becoming and re-becoming, of decay and renewal.

A post-theological poetics is a way of living in the world. It is centered around moments in which meaning is gained and lost. I signify these moments as X, dialogue, love, X-change, the cross, chiasmus, and reading and writing under the sign of the cross. It is a recognition, action toward, and passion for multiplicity of meaning between one text and an-other.

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## Introduction

...[T]here will never be *a theory* of feminist criticism; rather, feminist criticism will be a theorizing process, guided perhaps by an ethical dream of relationships between others.

– from Elizabeth A. Meese, *Crossing the Double Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism*, p.150

A post-theological poetics of agnosticism explores how I<sup>1</sup> create meaning, make sense of the world, undertake text making (all of which signify engaging in a poetics), beginning from a position of agnosticism (that is, “not knowing”) with respect to the world and the people in it. It is both self- and other-centered, both self-constructive and self-effacing, for dialogue, which is here equal to love, is the primary means by which I encounter the world and people within it as embodied texts. Hermeneutics underlies the entire inquiry, for I will consistently be using the language of texts and textuality. Thus, reading and writing become metaphors for ways in which I live in and engage the world. A reader is one who listens and is written upon, or is marked. A writer is one who listens and then writes, or makes the mark. Sometimes I am one and sometimes I am an-other, but I am always already text. The process of reading and writing which I advocate for this system is dialogue between one embodied text and an-other. Therefore, a particular ethics concerning the encounter between the body of the reader/writer and the bodies of other texts also underlies the entirety of this project.

Since the aim of reading and writing is engaging in dialogue between one text and an-other and dialogue itself is both a self- and other-centered, both a self-effacing and self-constructing process, the questions of reading and writing will be considered actions which occur

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<sup>1</sup> See Hélène Cixous' preface of *The Hélène Cixous Reader* ed. Susan Sellers (London: Routledge, 1994) xviii for a poetical description of “I” as “other” or “you” always already within: “Pure I, identical to I-self, does not exist. I is always in difference...A ‘myself’ which is the most intimate first name of you. I will never say often enough that the difference is not one, that there is never one without the other, and that the charm of difference (beginning with sexual difference) is that it passes. It crosses through us like a goddess. We cannot capture it. It makes us teeter with emotion. It is in this living agitation that there is always room for you in me, your presence and your place. I is never an individual. I is haunted. I is always, before knowing anything, an I-love-you.”

*sous rature*, or, under erasure.<sup>2</sup> Textual bodies will constantly de-construct and re-construct themselves, will be the embodiment of X, the *chiasmus*, or the cross. I read and write under erasure, for I do so with an inclusive view simultaneously toward both my-self and an-other.<sup>3</sup>

Let me begin with a discussion of what I mean by X. The following is a section of a passage taken from Jacques Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," which outlines his relationship with negative theology.<sup>4</sup> He here comes close to "defining" what X "is":

...this, which is called *X* (for example, text, writing, the trace, *différance*, the hymen, the supplement, the pharmakon, the parergon, etc.) "is" neither this nor that, neither sensible nor intelligible, neither positive nor negative, neither inside nor outside, neither superior nor inferior, neither active nor passive, neither present nor absent.... Despite appearances, then, this X is neither a concept nor even a name; it does not *lend itself* to a series of names, but calls for another syntax, and exceeds even the order and the structure of predicative discourse. It "is" not and does not say what it "is." It is written completely otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

This is, I suppose, a rather daunting quote in order for me to try to explain what "X" "is," since Derrida refuses the notion that it "is" anything. I think that a simple way of stating the situation is that X is an embodiment of inter-dependence. Or, to put it another way, X is the point where the transcendental necessarily meets and depends on the material, and this folding-back across time

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<sup>2</sup> I have appropriated this concept from Jacques Derrida.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth A. Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* (London: The University of North Carolina, 1986) 147-8: "Through a strategy of displacement, the assertion of disruptions and the admission of multivoiced central dictions, we can hope to protect the interests of all feminist critics. It requires work in consort rather than in opposition, but unlike pluralism, this de-centering criticism constantly takes itself apart as it takes others into itself."

<sup>4</sup> This relationship has developed since this particular article.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," *Derrida and Negative Theology*, trans. Ken Frieden 74, his emphasis. My source for this quote is Stephen Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 39-40. For further discussions of X, cf. Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write* (London: Yale University, 1992) 54-60; Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987) especially 63-96; and Geoffrey Bennington, "X," *Applying: To Derrida*, ed. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins, and Julian Wolfreys (London: Macmillan, 1996) 1-20.

and space is otherwise known as the quasi-transcendental.<sup>6</sup> One of Derrida's goals has been to "deconstruct" opposing dualities (e.g., God/human, transcendental/material, man/woman, heaven/hell, speech/writing) which permeate Western thought in particular. He does this essentially by demonstrating that, rather than viewing the two entities as opposing one another, we should recognize that they are interdependent upon one another, that neither entity can exist without the other. There is an exchange, or X-change, so to speak, which X illustrates, with each entity feeding from and thriving off the other.

Against the common usage of the word, I am using agnosticism not as a state in which I wish to remain but a starting point, an initial stance or frame of mind, from which I will eventually enact a transference. The transference is from "not knowing" to the process of creating knowledge. What is important is that I do not assume that I know before the process begins. A position of agnosticism, when entering a conversation, is a recognition that knowledge is fluid. I begin with the premise of not knowing by opening myself up because I have faith that I can learn a lesson from my partner in conversation. I have faith that my partner in conversation can teach me things. I have faith that by erasing myself I will enhance myself, benefit myself, gain information that will contribute to my-self. I am prepared to accept destruction, revision, and/or addition to what I consider my-self to be.<sup>7</sup>

I must here digress slightly to make a vital point. In spite of my constant readiness to accept change within my-self, I must also advocate discernment<sup>8</sup> within the process of X-change,

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<sup>6</sup> Paraphrased from Bennington 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> See Hélène Cixous, "The Newly Born Woman," *The Hélène Cixous Reader* 44-5 for a discussion of "I" or "my-self" as always in flux, growing, changing: "...She refuses life nothing. Her tongue doesn't hold back but holds forth, doesn't keep in but keeps on enabling. Where the wonder of being several and turmoil is expressed, she does not protect herself from these unknown feminines; she surprises herself at seeing, being, pleasuring in her gift of changeability. I am spacious singing Flesh: onto which is grafted no one knows which I – which masculine or feminine, more or less human but above all living, because changing I."

<sup>8</sup> See Meese 131: "...the act of woman writing is an act of defiance, grounded in the body; that 'woman' and writing are both political constructions; that feminist writing is a movement toward re-membered or re-bodied writing that materializes woman's specificity....[A woman writer might] struggle to liberate women and men from their oppositional positions in a hierarchical structure of sociosexual appropriation and domination. As women writers approach this liberation, they also point to a revolution in language and



for I do not wish to destroy my-self without a creative complement. I must protect my-self from one who wishes to harm me but not help. I must protect my-self from one who wishes to take from me, but not receive me and/or give to me. Once I have listened and received knowledge, I may decide whether to accept or reject it, for there are cases where encounters with an-other will not be productive for either my-self or an-other. Because I love my-self, I am openly cautious with my-self and an-other, and I handle these with care.

It is this entire process, the creation and “destruction” of knowledge, that is the embodiment of poetics. It is a disembodiment of the self in order to re-member the body of both my-self and an-other and the remembrance of an-other will ultimately contribute to the process of self-fulfillment, which is an ongoing process throughout the span of living in the world. Thus, allowing the process of poetics to take place inside my-self is both an active and passive means of constantly creating and re-creating my-self, of constantly becoming and re-becoming human.

There cannot be creation without the accompaniment of destruction; poiesis necessarily embodies both. Even if something is created out of nothing, the nothingness is thereby destroyed; thus, poiesis always involves both violence and risk. If I allow poiesis to happen inside me, I risk gaining and/or losing knowledge, thereby altering my belief system and possibly experiencing pain because of it. However, if I avoid poiesis, if I do not remember an-other, I may protect myself from the pain of loss of beliefs, but with this avoidance, I risk hurting myself, for, by closing myself, I do not enhance myself but remain as I am with no means toward completion or self-fulfillment.<sup>9</sup> I remain stagnant. Simply existing in the world rather than *living* in the world,

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literature, the coming together of theory and practice, in which writers...consciously subvert sociocultural conventions to embody feminist textual (re)presentations.” I rely on discernment in the meantime, since women and men are not yet free of this structure of “appropriation and domination.” Since I read and write in order to cultivate my-self, I must also choose not to read and write in order to preserve my-self, if I sense or feel that I may be harmed or abused in the process. Sometimes loving my-self is engaging in reading and writing with an-other, sometimes loving my-self is not engaging in reading and writing with an-other.

<sup>9</sup> For an interesting parallel to this argument, see Harry Brod, “Pornography and the Alienation of Male Sexuality,” *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, ed. Larry May, Robert Strikwerda, and Patrick D. Hopkins (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996). Brod uses an argument which points out how pornography is detrimental to men as well as to women “as part of a strategy through which one could at least potentially mobilize men against pornography's destructive effects on both women

neither contributing nor gaining anything at all. In addition, through reader/writer interaction with a text, the text is inevitably changed, for I, as reader, may contribute meaning from my own reaction, alter existing meaning, etc. As Derrida puts it: “How can one text...give or present another to be read, without touching it, without saying anything about it, practically without referring to it?”<sup>10</sup> Thus, when I say that violence is inherent within the process of encounter between reader/writer and text, I mean simply that change occurs which leaves its mark. How the mark is left and received from both sides (i.e., the ethics of the encounter) is a major concern.

Throughout the explication of the terms agnosticism and poetics, I have been describing a process, a way of living in the world or encountering the world, which I call dialogue. A post-theological poetics of agnosticism must necessarily center around dialogue, for dialogue is the means by which I can produce the chiasmus, X, in this lifetime, everyday, living in the world. Dialogue, if done properly, is the embodiment of X because it involves both myself and another.<sup>11</sup> It is an X-change that is grounded in relationships and consists of experiencing, listening and hearing, understanding, learning (or sense-making), and gaining knowledge, which leads to growth of my-self and wisdom. Dialogue is simultaneously living in the world and loving the world, loving myself and an-other, and, as love, it makes possible a convergence of the transcendental and the material.

What an American critic Peter Elbow refers to as the “believing game” is an excellent way to think about dialogue, although I do not like the language of “playing games” because it

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and men,” 239. Cf. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature,” *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Philadelphia: New Society, 1989). Here Ruether points out that “the plant [the thing being abused and oppressed] can happily carry out its processes of photosynthesis without human beings, but we [the oppressors] cannot exist without the photosynthesis of plants,” 146-7.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, “Living On: Border-lines,” *Deconstruction and Criticism*, trans. James Hulbert, ed. Bloom et al. (New York: Seabury, 1979) 80.

<sup>11</sup> See Alison Jasper, *The Shining Garment of the Text* 29: “One important presupposition of this book, then, is that the text has no ‘meaning’, in so far as that implies a single, fixed or ‘correct’ interpretation, but neither is it ‘meaningless’. I do not dispense with the idea of a text altogether but argue that any question or project has to be directed at, or formulated from, the face of intersection between text and interpreting or reading subjectivity – whether unified or fragmented, mine or someone else’s.” This “face of intersection” is analogous to my notion of dialogue.

implies that this process is both not something that I take seriously and that it is relegated to a specific time and place – as opposed to constantly engaging in dialogue within my day-to-day existence.<sup>12</sup> If someone is introducing ideas to me, especially if they are as yet unknown or incomprehensible to me, I must put aside doubt and argument while, at the same time, I must try to believe everything which that person is telling me. Nietzsche, in a formulation of a similar idea, puts it as follows: “We others, we immoralists, have...made room in our hearts for every kind of understanding, comprehending, and *approving*. We do not easily negate; we make it a point of honor to be *affirmers*.”<sup>13</sup>

I am employing the terms reading and writing as metaphors for ways of encountering the world, and people in it, as embodied texts. When I experience an event in the world, the event offers a particular structure; it contains within it reasons and causes and effects of its existence. It is, in this sense, authored or created by circumstances within the world. I, having experienced the event, read it with reference to my-self. I make sense of it both according to what I already know and, if I allow it to teach me, it contributes to my already-existing body of knowledge. Because an event has a structure of its own, because it is in some way intentional, I cannot read it whichever way I please. My reading must be grounded within the text itself, within the structure which the text offers. On the other hand, since I cannot completely escape from myself, since I will inevitably read from my-self so that I might cultivate my-self, my reading will contribute to

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Elbow, “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game – An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise,” *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University, 1973) 147-97. When setting up what it is that the believing game does, Elbow writes: “It helps to think of it [i.e., the believing game] as trying to get inside the head of someone who saw things this way...Try to have the experience of someone who made this assertion,” 149. Cf. Maria Lugones’ conception of playful “world”-travel in “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*, ed. Jeffner Allen (Albany: State University of New York, 1990) 159-80. She here talks about the necessity of understanding another’s world in order for love between and true communication with other women to be possible. I am not restricting my discussion to women; rather, I am speaking of dialogue/communication with all human beings and the world in which we live.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971) 491. It is significant that Nietzsche uses the negative term “immoralists” to describe the action of affirming or “not easily negat[ing].” After one affirms, one makes a choice as to what to believe for oneself; thus, one inevitably negates or leaves out some or all of what one previously

the text itself. I, as reader, create the text, engage in a poiesis, when I read from or out of my-self. As a reader, thus as creator/destroyer, I become a writer. Because my reading enhances the text, I partake in the production/destruction of the text. Therefore, the moment of reading crossing over into writing, poiesis, dialogue is all the same moment. It is a chiasmic moment, for it is an X-change. It is a moment of inter-dependence, for the texts involved, my-self and other, both gain and lose from the inter-action, as well as the inter-passion.

My thesis consists of two parts, each divided into two chapters. The first part sets up the strategy of my hermeneutical inquiry, asking the questions: Chapter 1 – What do I read and write under the sign of the cross? and Chapter 2 – How do I read and write under the sign of the cross? The final chapter is an application of the hermeneutical method discussed in the first part: Chapter 3 – Incarnation, or, the Drama of Becoming and Re-becoming (Human): A reading and writing of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*. Chapter 1 establishes my definition of a text under the sign of the cross, which is, metaphorically speaking, anything that can be read and/or written upon, including but not limited to, books, bodies, conversations, and events in the world. Chapter 2 describes my system of reading and writing under the sign of the cross as one which is governed by three main concepts: recognition, inter-action, and inter-passion, all of which are essential within the process of X-change. Chapter 3 finds the love relationship between the narrator and her/his beloved in Winterson's *Written on the Body* to be incarnational, for the lovers easily and immediately achieve the transcendental within the sensible, then spend the rest of the novel re-membering what (they ought) to do with this gift. The relationship between these lovers embodies all that is involved in reading and writing under the sign of the cross. In addition, John's prologue (John 1.1-18) runs throughout the entirety of Chapter 3, for it serves as subtext to Winterson's *Written on the Body*.

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affirmed. Nietzsche himself rejects what Christians consider "moral" and distinguishes himself from them by embracing the term "immoral."

I have appropriated concepts from Christian theology, Philosophy (esp. Existentialism), literary criticism, Feminism, Modernism, Post-modernism, Post-structuralism, Semiotics, Psychoanalysis, and other areas of discourse in order to explore various aspects or manifestations of the singular moment of crossing, connection, contextualization and re-contextualization which occurs between one text and an-other. I refer to this moment as love, dialogue, X, X-change, the chiasmus, the navel, and reading and writing under the sign of the cross, as well as other synonyms throughout this project. The result of this endeavor is what I call a post-theological poetics of agnosticism, for within this name reside knowledge and uncertainty, God and no god, creation and destruction, faith and doubt. It is ultimately a textuality of relationships between one and an-other.

## What do I read and write under the sign of the cross?

### Introduction

In order to appropriately explore the question, “What do I read and write under the sign of the cross?,” I will divide this chapter into two main sections. In the first section, I will present the ideas of several critics who have in some way contributed answers to the question, “What is a text?,” for, by asking the question, “What do I read and write under the sign of the cross?,” I will be essentially talking about texts and textuality. In other words, the answer, simply put, to the question “What do I read and write under the sign of the cross?” is “texts.” Thus, I will then explore the question “What is a text under the sign of the cross?,” and in doing so, I will necessarily need to present ideas about the textuality of texts, both the critics and my own.<sup>14</sup>

Upon first glance, it may seem that there is little difference between the question “What is a text?” and a discussion of the textuality of texts, and this observation is correct, to a certain extent. The difference is subtle, but it will turn out to be an important distinction within the methodology of reading and writing under the sign of the cross, primarily because of the ethical implications it holds. The discussion of the question “What is a text?” will involve presenting ideas about textual attributes; that is, qualities that make-up or constitute the “thing” I refer to as a “text.” For example, some of the questions which will arise from this discussion will be: “Is a text solely something that is written, or can it involve other media as well?,” “What is the function of a text?,” “Is it bound to or separate from everyday reality?” Questions such as these, I think, are limited to explaining the qualities of a text in and of itself. In other words, they do not, or fail to, explore exactly what kind of thing a text is, what kind of existence or “being” a text

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<sup>14</sup> My definition of a “text” and “textuality” will be distinguished from other critics by their existence under the sign of the cross. In other words, by marking the concepts of “text” and “textuality” with this sign, this X, I re-cognize these terms as ones whose existence consists of partaking in the processes of inter-action and inter-passion, as opposed to other critics (whom I’ve encountered) who do not recognize this inter-dependence between one text and an-other.

possesses, especially concerning the “position” of texts in relation to human beings<sup>15</sup>; and this is where textuality takes the reins.

Textuality, then, becomes vital to a discussion concerning how a text stands in relation to us as readers and writers. When textuality (and, in some ways more importantly, intertextuality) is involved in the picture, the discussion begins to move toward the text as an entity with a body, albeit a “textual body,” with which dialogue can be possible. Paul Ricoeur, for example, has written extensively on the “What is a text?” question and gives an emphatic “no” to the possibility of dialogue between a reader and a text.<sup>16</sup> By beginning with Ricoeur’s notions of both text and dialogue, then applying the work of Scharlemann and others to develop Ricoeur’s basic concepts, dialogue is possible between a reader/writer (as text) and a text(ual body) through the process of reading and writing under the sign of the cross. To take the additional step, via the notion of both textuality and intertextuality, toward the actualization of dialogue between text(ual bodies) is an important step in my argument because of ethical implications of the already existing interconnections between texts as bodies and bodies as texts. The aforementioned implications necessitate a recognition of inter-dependence between text(ual bodies), as well as the encounter (or, reading and writing) of text(ual bodies) through inter-action and inter-passion.

The second section of this chapter will look at the textuality of Winterson’s *Written on the Body*. To discuss textuality I will appropriate and expand Mieke Bal’s method of reading by the navel which she uses throughout *Reading “Rembrandt”*.<sup>17</sup> The sign of the navel is synonymous with the sign of the cross, for they both are inherently ambiguous and point to inter-

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<sup>15</sup> My language here has become conspicuously Heideggerian when speaking in terms of textuality. I owe this primarily to Scharlemann, “The Textuality of Texts,” *Meanings in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricoeur*, David E. Klemm & William Schweiker, eds. (London: University Press of Virginia, 1993) 13-25. I will explore Scharlemann’s excellent article in detail later in this chapter.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, “What is a text? Explanation and Understanding,” “Metaphor and the problem of hermeneutics,” and “Appropriation,” *Paul Ricoeur Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981), 145-64; 165-81; 182-93. See below for a more in-depth discussion of Ricoeur’s ideas.

<sup>17</sup> Mieke Bal, *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991). See pp.22-3 for her initial introduction of reading by the navel. Cf. below for my thoughts on reading by the navel and my expansion of her ideas to suit my own purposes.

dependence. As it turns out, all of these texts have an implicit connection to the navel and/or the absence of navel, (the text[ual body] without a navel being the blank page). Thus, through the method of reading and writing by the navel or absence of the navel, I will reveal and expound upon the context of these texts as one which is bodily-centered, or, to put it another way, one which occurs in the space of bodily metaphors.<sup>18</sup>

The presence or absence of navel, as a sign by which to read and/or write, not only grounds my discussion of the textuality of these texts in the space of body-centered metaphors, but the navel's presence or absence also connotes specific types of bodies; namely, grotesque bodies. The navel (or absence of navel) can be read as a sign of grotesque realism<sup>19</sup> because it points to the omni-presence of both life (i.e., both birth and being alive) and death, among other things. Thus, as an aspect of textuality, within the context of the presence/absence of navel, life and death, I will further define the metaphors for textual space that occur in these texts; for example, womb, grave, blank page. In addition, explicating textual space, or context, will lead me into other aspects of textuality, which are the presence of pretexts/pre-texts, subtexts, and textures.

Pretext, or pre-text, holds two different meanings, depending upon the spelling and context of the text. When I speak of pretext, without the hyphen, I am using the word in the sense of an "occasion" or "reason." Pre-text, on the other hand, will generally signify one or more narratives that existed prior to the text in question which are useful as a source in the analysis of a

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<sup>18</sup> In an interview featured in *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (London: Routledge, 1993), Luce Irigaray talks about her book *Speculum* and uses the term "morpho-logic" when describing the process which she undertook in order to make her own body "become the object of a female subjectivity experiencing and identifying itself," as opposed to "the female body...remain[ing] the object of men's discourse or their various arts..." (59). Likewise, Irigaray asserts that this morpho-logic is "aimed at the male subject, too, inviting him to redefine himself as a body with a view to exchanges between sexed subjects." In light of these remarks, I think that the term morpho-logic nicely describes the process of developing an ethics of reading and writing which places itself in the space of body-centered metaphors. Cf. Irigaray's *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie & Judith Still (New York: Routledge, 1992) for a fascinating, poetic venture into the relations between "sexed subjects" which is overflowing with body metaphors.



given text, or, in other words, to add “depth” to the given text.<sup>20</sup> Subtext is similar to pre-text, but it does not necessarily come before the text in question. Rather, a subtext of a given text underlies everything depicted in the said text, and it does not have to have any relation to the pre-text. Like the notion of pretext/pre-text, subtext(s) adds depth to a text.

In the sense that pretexts/pre-texts and subtexts add depth to a given text, they play a primary role in the contribution of texture to a text. The definition of texture, as a noun, is as follows: “1. the surface of a material, esp. as perceived by the sense of touch. 2. the structure, appearance, and feel of a woven fabric. 3. the general structure and disposition of the constituent parts of something: *the texture of a cake*. 4. the distinctive character or quality of something: *the texture of life in America*.”<sup>21</sup> Because I am dealing with texts, both tangible and intangible entities, I will be referring to texture of a text in a metaphorical sense. Speaking in terms of metaphorical texture complements my treatment of these texts as bodies/bodies as texts and will give me an interesting vocabulary with which to engage them in dialogue. Exploring these paths that are riddled with “text-”words will allow me to develop the textuality of the texts that I have chosen as a textuality which involves dialogue with grotesque bodies.

### **Toward embodied dialogue within the textuality of a text**

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, my goal in this section will be to move from slightly closed definitions of text(s) toward definitions that will leave room for the possibility of dialogue between bodies; that is, between the body of the reader and the body of the text. Furthermore, I will argue that the concept of text is itself a metaphorical concept; thus, my use of body metaphors to talk about textuality is not only completely appropriate but is also a useful way

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<sup>19</sup> For an introduction to grotesque realism in Medieval folk culture, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 18-26. I will further discuss Bakhtin’s ideas below.

<sup>20</sup> My line of thought here is based on Bal, *Reading “Rembrandt”*: “The term “pre-text” is...intentionally ambiguous, referring to the ordinary sense of “occasion” as well as to the temporal sense of “prior text,” (n.3, 139).

to begin to both understand and have dialogue with texts. I will accomplish this by beginning with a presentation and deconstruction of Paul Ricoeur's ideas about "What is a text?" and will then go beyond mere textual aspects to ideas about textuality. The discussion of the textuality of texts will lead me to questions such as "What is the function of a text?, or, What does a text *do*?" and "What kind of existence does a text possess?" and "How does the application of body metaphors to a text affect what has been construed as the textuality of texts?" Let us now begin with Paul Ricoeur.

Ricoeur defines a text as follows:

the text is a discourse fixed by writing. What is fixed by writing is thus a discourse which could be said, of course, but which is written precisely because it is not said. Fixation by writing takes the very place of speech, occurring at the site where speech could have emerged. This suggests that a text is really a text only when it is not restricted to transcribing an anterior speech, when instead it inscribes directly in written letters what the discourse means.<sup>22</sup>

Text is something which is written, and speech is something which is spoken and involves at least two people. Ricoeur distinguishes between written texts and speech because a text, as written language, is separated from its author or creator; whereas with speech, the "creators" are present as the event takes place and speak of things which are likewise present and already understood by the two interlocutors.<sup>23</sup> That there is an insurmountable structural difference between speech and writing is important for Ricoeur's hermeneutics, for he consistently devises ways to overcome what he sees as "the central the problem of hermeneutics," that of interpretation,<sup>24</sup> stemming directly from the fact that a text as writing stands alone, without the aid of its

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<sup>21</sup> *Collins Concise English Dictionary*. 1992 ed.

<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur, "What is a text? Explanation and understanding," 146.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Moore, *Post-Structuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) summarizes the speech/writing opposition nicely: "...authors have a way of being absent, even dead, and their intended meaning can no longer be directly intuited, or

author/father/creator. Furthermore, a text as written language cannot itself explain the world which it presents because its voice, its means of explanation and conversation, is also absent with the absence of its author/creator;<sup>25</sup> thus, it is impossible for a reader to have a dialogue with a text.<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur's declaration of impossibility of dialogue hinges upon two things: 1) the notion that dialogue is something which occurs between two speakers and 2) the speech vs. writing distinction. Since I have already discussed dialogue as X-change between textual bodies, I will here delve further into the speech vs. writing distinction and will return to dialogue as X-change below. Since Derrida readily deconstructs the apparent opposition between speech and writing,<sup>27</sup> I will briefly present a summary of his ideas.

Derrida points out that speech has always been placed above writing, "idealized at the expense of writing,"<sup>28</sup> because of the notion that speech represents presence, while writing represents absence. With speech, the speaker is present in the fullest sense of the word. Language flows immediately from the speaker's mouth; thus, it seems that the immediacy of the speaker's language, along with his or her physical presence, signifies truth. In contrast, because writing is cut off from its source, because the writer is not immediately present, writing is an absence that cannot be fully trusted. Moore sums up these attitudes towards speech (as opposed to writing) as "voice, presence, truth."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Derrida claims that all the terms which

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double-checked through question and answer, as in the face-to-face situation of speech" (30). See below for further discussion of this idea.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the central problem of hermeneutics," 165.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Robert Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1989) where he talks about the "frustration" of "texts efforts to be subsumed in the full embodiment they strive toward, and from the inability of the corporeal addressed by these texts to come fully to word, to express itself adequately in language" (123). Detweiler sees the "frustration" of texts as coming from their lack of physical bodies and separation from their creator.

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, "What is a text?," 146: "The writing-reading relation is thus not a particular case of the speaking-answering relation. It is not a relation of interlocution, not an instance of dialogue."

<sup>27</sup> See especially Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*. Cf. "La Différance" in *Tel Quel: Théorie d'Ensemble*, 41-66 for a summary of his ideas. I am basing the following discussion of Derrida's ideas on two sources that break his writing down into easy-to-swallow bites; these are Moore, *Post-Structuralism and the New Testament* 28-31 and Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1977) 145-48.

<sup>28</sup> Moore, *Post-Structuralism and the New Testament* 28.

<sup>29</sup> Moore, *Post-Structuralism and the New Testament* 28.

indicate basic philosophical or theological concepts hold within them “the constant of a presence.”<sup>30</sup> Moore lists several of these terms: “God, being, essence, existence, substance, subject, object, consciousness, and so on.”<sup>31</sup> Derrida’s phrase for this Western obsession with presence and truth is the “metaphysics of presence.”<sup>32</sup>

One of Derrida’s goals, among others, is to demonstrate that absence is already present, just as much present, in speech as it is in writing. Wielding the sword of semiotics and following Saussure’s lead, Derrida argues that a word spoken in speech, such as “tree,” is just as distant from, or removed from, the actual thing, the actual tree itself, as is the written word “tree.” Thus, “speech is as ‘impure’, as ‘trace’-ridden, as ‘secondary’ as any sign-system.”<sup>33</sup> In short, nothing, for Derrida, is ever simply present or simply absent, and speech, especially, is not as simple and immediate as it may seem/was once thought to be.

I agree with Derrida, yet my own interests in the deconstruction of the speech/writing hierarchy differ from his. The writer of a text is, indeed, absent from the text; the text is essentially cut off from its creator. Likewise, speech involves at least two people who, perhaps speaking and listening in turn, are in the physical presence of one another, and, because of this, speech seems to have a clear advantage as far as an immediate occasion for questions, answers, and possible clarification. However, Derrida is correct in asserting that speech is just as “impure” and “trace”-ridden as writing seems, for there is never a guarantee that just because a speaker is present that the person addressed will understand, even if the opportunity for questioning is present as well. Presence does not necessitate either understanding or truth. And in the same vein, presence is not more informative and/or productive than absence. Silence, for example, at times may be much more “telling” or “revealing” of information or a truth than either spoken or

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<sup>30</sup> Moore, *Post-Structuralism and the New Testament* 28. Moore is here quoting Derrida.

<sup>31</sup> Moore, *Post-Structuralism and the New Testament* 28-9.

<sup>32</sup> He also uses the term “logocentrism” to point to the aforementioned notions about the privileged relationship between *logos* (Word, speech, reason) and the concept of presence.

written words. If I ask my only flatmate, “Did you eat my last piece of chocolate cake?” and she does not answer me, only looks down or away and keeps silent, then I can feel sure that she is guilty of my suspicion. On the other hand, if she would have immediately answered me, “No! Of course I didn’t!” then I would be forced to take her word for it. A speaker, in other words, is just as capable of misleading the reader/questioner as is a written text.

Derrida is correct in stating that nothing is either simply present or absent; however, for my purposes, it is not necessary to stress that “the present is irremediably divided from itself,”<sup>34</sup> nor to over-emphasize the *différance*, if you will, already dis-connecting the signifying potency of both speech and writing. In other words, it will not be productive for me to concentrate on the negative aspects of language. Instead, I wish to demonstrate the possibility of presence, both spatial and temporal, within a text, all texts, and not just writing as such. Because a text can be something, a physical entity and/or an event, besides simply writing (specifically, anything that can be read, anything that prompts a shift in our understanding of the world in which we live), I must de-emphasize the phenomenon called “writing” and replace emphasis on the text. Furthermore, I am not trying to refute the idea that language, as a system of signification, is essentially negative or that the meanings of words are realized/actualized by what they do not mean. I do not favor the idea of presence over absence or vice versa. I hope to demonstrate that a text both can be engaged in dialogue and is as fully present when/if engaged in dialogue as is another living human body. Since we have seen that a text does not depend on its author/creator to present its own meaning, neither does dialogue depend on two speaking subjects. Rather, dialogue can occur between textual bodies in the form of X-change between my-self as text and an-other as text. The tools or method of X-change is reading and writing under the sign of the cross. But, I have gotten ahead of myself with the latter point; thus, I must bring the conversation

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<sup>33</sup> Hawkes 147-48. Derrida also develops the concepts of *différance*, trace, signature, and *l’écriture* to demonstrate his points. For an explanation of trace and *différance*, see Hawkes 147-48. For an explanation of signature and *l’écriture*, see Moore, *Post-Structuralism and the New Testament* 30-1.

<sup>34</sup> Moore *Post-Structuralism and the New Testament* 31.

back around to my original exploration, that of “What is a text?” I shall here begin a discussion of representation vs. reality in order to move closer to answering questions such as “What is the function of a text?” or “What does a text do?” It is through a discussion of representation vs. reality and working within questions such as the latter that will lead us further toward the idea of text as metaphor, as well as the possibility of embodied dialogue within the textuality of a text.

To begin the discussion of representation vs. reality, I will once again turn to Ricoeur. In his essay entitled “Metaphor and the problem of hermeneutics,”<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur demonstrates how interpretation of both texts and metaphors is possible. He accomplishes this by setting up the idea of text and the idea of metaphor as forms of discourse, arguing that because a metaphor is a smaller unit of discourse than a text, we can analyze how meaning is both given to and drawn from a metaphor in order to shed light on how this same process occurs in its larger counterpart, the text. My interests in this article lie within what Ricoeur sees as the function of metaphors and texts, for a metaphor is a “*work [text] in miniature*”<sup>36</sup>. In addition, the function of metaphor/text gives insight into the concept of Reality and will problematize the distinction often imposed between representation (writing, fiction, text, metaphor) and reality.

Ricoeur defines metaphorical meaning as “opposed to literal meaning,” and “literal meaning” is “the totality of the semantic field, the set of possible contextual uses which constitutes the polysemy of a word.”<sup>37</sup> The metaphorical meaning of a word cannot be found under the dictionary entry of the word in question. The metaphorical meaning of a word must be other than the literal meaning because a metaphor receives meaning from particular contexts. The new, or “emergent meaning,” of the word results in the systematic exclusion of already-existing meanings and “provides clues for finding a new meaning capable of according with the

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<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur 165-81.

<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur 167. For explanations of the difference between the terms *text* and *work*, see Bal 216-18; and Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspective* 40. The general sense of the argument is that a *work* is a finished product exhibiting wholeness, whereas a *text* stands on shakier ground, requiring reader interaction and interpretation(s). I prefer the term *text* over *work*, for I believe that meaning can be made and re-made.

context of the sentence and rendering the sentence meaningful therein.”<sup>38</sup> A metaphor, then, creates meaning for a word or, as Ricoeur prefers, a sentence that was not previously associated with the word/sentence. At the same time, the context of the metaphor allows the reader to discern the meaning which has been created. Because the metaphorical statement creates meaning within a specific context, Ricoeur argues that this instance of creation is an “event” which retains meaning and can be recalled at a later time. If it happens that the meaning of a metaphor ceases to be a creative event and becomes associated with the word as a literal meaning, then “the metaphor is no longer living but dead,” for, “only authentic, living metaphors are at the same time ‘event’ *and* ‘meaning’.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, if the meaning of a metaphor becomes commonplace and automatically associated with a word, the metaphor ceases to be a metaphor and, instead, becomes lexical or definable. It is in this way that meaning which emerges from a text/metaphor contributes to what we call Reality. The text/metaphor produces new meaning which affects the way we, as readers and writers of metaphor/text, view the world in which we live. Therefore, the reading and writing of texts constantly change what we call Reality. Reality is always in flux, being defined and redefined and in the process of metamorphosis.<sup>40</sup>

Ricoeur argues that this metamorphosis occurs in the mode of “play,”<sup>41</sup> for the writer/reader enter a game, putting aside the self in order to create/receive the text’s world and institute the change of the self in front of the given world. The notion of play implies that metamorphosis or, simply put, learning is relegated to a particular time, i.e. play-time, and living in the world, i.e. being in reality, constitutes all other time. To keep metamorphosis/learning

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<sup>37</sup> Ricoeur 169.

<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur 170.

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur 170.

<sup>40</sup> This is not a new idea and has been addressed by many critics. See, e.g., Detweiler 21-2; Hawkes 142, 149; Hawkes discusses Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Derrida who all hold similar positions; Klemm and Schweiker 15. Derrida, via Hawkes, sums up this idea most clearly, “Writing...does not ‘reproduce’ a reality beyond itself, nor does it ‘reduce’ that reality...it can be seen to *cause a new reality to come into being*,” 149, his emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur 182-93. For his explanation of “play,” see especially pp. 185-90. For other critics who appeal to the notion of play, see Detweiler, Elbow, and Ledbetter. Each of these critics puts a slightly different slant

safely tucked away in a sphere of play, in a sphere into which I can choose to enter whenever it is convenient for me to do so, is to deny the ability and the power of change which this world, life as a text, at all times has to offer me. Reading and writing are not (or, I submit, should not be) activities in which I engage periodically. On the contrary, reading and writing are ways of living in the world, ways that allow me to authentically engage in, with, and through the world by both receiving and contributing to the world. Dialogue with the world as text can (and, once again, I think should) be an omni-present and on-going process. To speak of play is to undermine and belittle this process.

Since I am denying that play is the mode of being of a text, what should be put in its place? It is here that I turn to Robert Scharlemann<sup>42</sup> and his assertion that Ricoeur's hermeneutics would benefit from a discussion of textuality as the mode of being of texts. Scharlemann grounds his discussion of the textuality of texts in Heidegger's distinctions among modes of being. In Scharlemann's words:

...a text is 'there too with' us differently from the way in which other human beings are 'there too with' us, because texts are there in the materiality of linguistic signs rather than that of a physical body. This is to say that the mode of being of texts, indicated by the word *textuality*, is not among the modes enumerated from Heidegger but that it can be defined by comparison with the 'being there too with' us that does appear in Heidegger.<sup>43</sup>

Rightly said, I think, Scharlemann here sets up his argument that a text is not a being (among human beings) in possession of a physical body, but is a being among us nevertheless. He goes on to say that, rather than having a physical body, a text as a being there too with us has a textual

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on their use of the term, but they are all grounded in the same sort of ideas concerning representation vs. reality.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Scharlemann, "The Textuality of Texts," *Meanings in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricoeur*, ed. David E. Klemm and William Schweiker (London: University Press of Virginia, 1993) 13-25.

<sup>43</sup> Scharlemann 13-14.



body; thus, a text is an embodied being which exists among us in our world. Because the textuality of a text points to the embodiment of a text, we can, in Scharlemann's words:

encounter another self, the 'voice' of the text, just as we encounter another self in other human existents, and that this voice of the text need not be identical with the biographical person who is the author of the text.<sup>44</sup>

With the assertion that a text exists among us as an embodied being in the world, Scharlemann appropriates metaphors taken from human bodies in order to describe what kind of being there too with us a text is, but he does not stop here. He continues his argument by claiming that, like human bodies, the textual body possesses uniquely structured features comparable to human individuality. Furthermore, textual individuality cannot be abstracted from the text, just as the individuality of a human being cannot be abstracted from a person (i.e., the body of a person): "their [text's] voices are inseparably joined with the ordered words that uniquely articulate a here-now of the voice of the text."<sup>45</sup> It is at this point that Scharlemann's discussion of the textuality of texts fully "embodies," if you will, the mode of being of a text. Thus, texts are similar beings in the world to human beings except that the latter possess physical bodies and the former possess metaphorical bodies. Other than that, however, both texts and human beings possess attributes, identities, "personalities," voices, selves, ideas, and so on. Therefore, Scharlemann's work opens up the possibility of dialogue with texts, from one body to another.

We can now successfully move past Ricoeur's adamant assertion that dialogue with a text is an impossibility. Ricoeur's primary reason for the denial of dialogue with texts is the declaration that an author is removed from a text, that writing as text stands alone as its own world apart from the author; thus, it is impossible to engage in a dialogue between subjects: that of the reader-subject and that of the author-subject.<sup>46</sup> As Ricoeur views dialogue, I can say that I agree with him; the body of the author is not present within a text, and it is impossible to have a

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<sup>44</sup> Scharlemann 21.

<sup>45</sup> Scharlemann 23.

dialogue with the author. However, when textuality via Scharlemann is brought into the picture, it becomes clear that dialogue with the textual body (the textual self, the voice of the text) is not only possible but also a necessary way of encountering this ‘being there too with’ us; that is, the text. Moreover, the way in which dialogue is possible is on textual terms, through reading and writing under the sign of the cross.

The textuality of texts finds its complement and is reinforced by ideas concerning the *intertextuality* of texts. Two critics that have argued for intertextuality are Bakhtin<sup>47</sup> and Kristeva<sup>48</sup>, who was largely inspired by Bakhtin. Bakhtin uses the term “quoted speech” to describe the way we, as human beings, appropriate the already-existing language available to us in order to develop our own ideas. As he himself puts it:

...we are actually dealing with someone else’s words more often than our own...someone else’s speech makes it possible to generate our own and thus becomes an indispensable factor in the creative power of language.<sup>49</sup>

This appropriation of language not our own is, in essence, intertextuality. We use the language (the texts) given by others in order to form own language (texts). It is, thus, not a far stretch to assert that texts themselves recall and appropriate language not their own. Here is Kristeva commenting on Bakhtin:

...any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur 146-7, 149, 165, 176-77, 182, 191-92.

<sup>47</sup> Bakhtin, especially the foreword by Krystyna Pomorsha, ix-x.

<sup>48</sup> Toril Moi ed. *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 37, 111.

<sup>49</sup> Bakhtin ix.

<sup>50</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” in Moi 37. Cf. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, printed in part in Moi 111: “The term *intertextuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another...”; and Hawkes 144 commenting on Kristeva, “As Julia Kristeva has pointed out, no ‘text’ can ever be completely ‘free’ of other texts. It will be involved in what she has termed the *intertextuality* of all writing.” Cf. Hélène Cixous’ preface to *The Hélène Cixous Reader* xxi: “We are the learned or ignorant caretakers of several memories. When I write, language remembers without my knowing or indeed with my knowing, remembers the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, the whole of literature,

Thinking about texts in these terms demonstrates that texts (whether verbal, visual, or otherwise) are all interconnected through their relation with language (speech, thought, writing, etc.). Dialogue (as language recalling, reinterpreting, being in conversation) is already present and, to put it more strongly, inescapable within the medium of the text; therefore, I see the concept of intertextuality as yet another basis for my claim of the possibility of dialogue with embodied texts via reading and writing under the sign of the cross, for it is simply adding on another layer of, or being true to (the), intertextuality (of texts).

And now, for the final part of this section, I must backtrack a bit and make clear why it is important that I speak in terms of the bodies of texts, thereby invoking body metaphors.<sup>51</sup> I have already argued that the textuality of texts as embodied texts, as texts which exist ‘there too with’ us in the world, enables me to develop an ethics of reading and writing which involves the practice of dialogue with embodied texts through the action and passion of reading and writing under the sign of the cross. But the latter argument does not point specifically to why it is (or might be) necessary to speak in terms of texts as bodies. One reason is that the use of body language, or body metaphor, serves as a way to make the idea of dialogue with texts both tangible and more easily imaginable. Dialogue between subjects, between bodies with voices, is, I think, easier to grasp than dialogue between one subject with a voice and body and another subject lacking both of the above. But there is a second reason which is more vital to both the totality of

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each book. Then, I who write, I inscribe an additional memory in language – a memory in progress – of what I have read personally, noticed, retained from a text or a language to the other. And the whole is poured back, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, into the river I sail.”

<sup>51</sup> See Ledbetter 10-19 (esp. 10-13) for his explanation of his own invocation of body metaphors. His discussion is often very similar to my own: “Intimacy is an appropriate goal in the exercises of writing and reading” and “...I cannot remove body metaphor from thought and, in particular, from how I relate to the world; therefore, understanding body metaphor becomes important to how I understand the world...,” (12). Detweiler also speaks in terms of body metaphor throughout his book, but he does not really ever explain why body metaphors are important or what effect their use has on his reading/writing about texts. Cf. Kelly Oliver ed., *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University, 1997) xx-xxi, for a discussion of Kristeva’s theory concerning the relation between language and the experiences of the body. For Kristeva, in Oliver’s words, “The force of language is living drive force transferred into language. Signification is like a transfusion of the living body into language,” (xx).

this project and to myself, as a human being, living in the world. I will here discuss this second reason.

In addition to developing an ethics of reading and writing, I am also developing an ethics of the body, and these two tasks are interrelated through the medium of dialogue. Dialogue through reading and writing, or, more specifically, reading and writing under the sign of the cross, with texts as bodies/bodies as texts is really about developing ways of living in the world. What is at stake here is experiencing, learning, gaining knowledge, and loving. Reading and writing are, for me, about learning and loving. Dialogue, as well, is about learning and loving. And dialogue/loving is a way of living in the world/experiencing the world that maximizes learning and the gaining of knowledge. The way to go about having dialogue, engaging in dialogue, is by being open to the gaining of new knowledge and/or to the re-gaining of knowledge-already acquired. Openness is the key, and this openness, I think, must be a constant thing. Once again, to hearken back to an earlier point, my assertion of constant openness is the reason that I cannot accept the metaphor of play to which Ricoeur and others appeal. Play is something done during an allotted space of time, and living in reality is what is done for the rest of time. Ricoeur advocates putting the self aside during periods of play, but I say I must simultaneously and at all times put my-self aside (i.e., cross my-self out) as well as make my-self fully present to an-other with whom I am inter-acting. And here lies the paradox of dialogue as living in the world: I constantly relinquish myself in order to cultivate myself. By marking my-self with the cross, I make my-self fully present and fully absent, ready to give my-self and receive (the voice of) an-other in order to benefit both my-self and an-other.

Thus, when I speak of voices of texts, I am, as Scharlemann pointed out, speaking of beings with bodies. The shape, or shaping, of my body and the shape/shaping of a textual body are, indeed, not so different. What I refer to as my-self is a thing which has been shaped and developed by my environment, other people, places, experiences in the world, and so on. Just as a text is brought into existence by an author, creator, artisan, the things listed have been the

author, creator, artisan of my-self, if you will. In short, I (my-self) am an embodied text just as much as these other embodied entities that are ‘being there too with’ us (me). The significant questions become, then: “What are my responsibilities toward my-self as text and the other as text?” “How do I, my-self as text, live in the world along with an-other as text?” “How do I approach these texts?” “How do I treat them?” “What is my position/role in relation to them?” All of these questions are ethical questions, and all are vital to the explorations within this thesis. .

I will now move into the second section of this chapter and discuss the textuality of the particular texts with which I will be engaging in dialogue. I will apply all that I have already discussed to these particular texts and, as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, will also discuss different aspects of their textuality, such as contexts, pre-texts, subtexts, textures, in order to more fully grasp what kinds of textual bodies, what kinds of voices, selves, I will be encountering in the following chapters of this thesis.

### **Textuality (of) and dialogue with grotesque bodies**

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, the textual bodies of the texts with which I will be working are, in Bakhtinian terms, grotesque bodies. I not only draw from Bakhtin to arrive at this conclusion but also from Bal and her explication of the textuality of the navel. Bal replaces Derrida’s metaphor of hymen with the navel in order to aid in reading visual images as texts. During my research for this thesis, I was inspired by Bal’s notion of reading by the navel, and it has greatly influenced my ideas when developing the concept of reading and writing under the sign of the cross. I chose to use the metaphor of the cross rather than the navel because of implications of marking (i.e., writing) that the cross holds within it. The navel, on the other hand, does not necessarily imply making a mark as it does reading a mark. Nevertheless, the navel remains a helpful parallel metaphor when discussing both marked and unmarked textual bodies; thus, I will use it interchangeably with the metaphor of the cross.

The following is what her introduction of the textuality of the navel (as opposed to Derrida's hymen) means to Bal:

...the navel – both a trace of the mother, and the token of autonomy of the subject, male and female alike; a center without meaning, it is yet a meaningful pointer that allows plurality and mobility, that allows the viewers to propose new readings to meet his or her needs, but without letting those readings fall into the arbitrariness that leads to isolation.<sup>52</sup>

Several points can be drawn out of this explanation that will also apply to my readings and writings of the texts in this thesis. First, the navel as a sign which points to, at the same time, both the mother's body and the autonomy of the subject (or the absence of the mother's body) is notable theme running throughout the texts I have chosen. Because of the tension implied within the sign of the navel, that is, the tension between a connection with the mother('s body) the will of the character to establish him/herself as an autonomous being, apart from the mother('s body), the characters in these texts all have, in different ways, peculiar relationships with both their mothers and themselves. The space of the text as well, the entirety of the textual body, can be (and is) both a comforting place (the safe haven of the womb or the mother's house) and, at the same time, a frightening, threatening place which arises from the existential implications of autonomy (the grave, the sign of the inevitable end to the autonomous life, apart from, or outside of, the mother).

Second, as is implied by Bal's thoughts, the navel as a part of the body, as a mark on the body, really has no function, no meaning, in and of itself. It is a useless mark in a present, temporal sense, serving only to remind its bearer and/or the reader of the existence that once was (the womb) and the existence that will be (the grave), both of these existences being uncertain and unknowable, to say the least. The navel does not, then, make sense in and of itself. Just as one word or sentence plucked out of a text and left to stand alone may not make sense outside the

textual body, so the navel does not have function/meaning outside the context of the body. Indeed, it is only within the context of the body, within the entire scope of existence, that the navel holds meaning, and this meaning depends solely on how the reader/writer chooses to read/write by it. In other words, the reader/writer can choose to interpret (by) the navel in either direction, towards death or towards life, or the reader/writer can interpret (by) the navel in both directions at once, thereby being true to the navel's ambivalent nature.

Up until this point, I have, as Bal does, taken for granted that a navel is always present within the boundaries (context) of the textual body. As we will see within the space of many of these texts, an obligatory presence of navel is not necessarily the case. For example, the narrator of Dinesen's "The Blank Page" tells of a Carmelite convent in Portugal that displays the sections of the nuptial sheets which have been marked by the blood of the daughters of the royal families. Hanging in the midst of these marked sheets, however, is "one which differs from the others...the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page."<sup>53</sup> The sheets which have been stained, marked, by the virgin princess' blood have been given a navel. Once as "snow-white" as the blank page, these texts have been given a sign from which to read. The blank page contains no such sign; it speaks through its difference. It embodies absence and silence. As we will see in later chapters of this thesis, the blank page is not without voice; it is not inaccessible. It speaks just as loudly as the marked page, as the page with navel, but it requires a different kind of reading in order to make the voice intelligible. The narrator tells us that, in front of it:

the old princesses of Portugal—worldly wise, dutiful, long-suffering queens, wives and mothers—and their noble old playmates, bridesmaids and maids-of-

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<sup>52</sup>Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"* 22.

<sup>53</sup> Dinesen 104.

honor have most often stood still. It is in front of the blank page that old and young nuns, with the Mother Abbess herself, sink into deepest thought.<sup>54</sup>

The women silence themselves/are silenced. One faces absence with absence. Silence with silence.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, the bodies of these texts and the bodies in these texts are both marked bodies (with navels) and unmarked bodies (without navels), and I will read/write by the presence or absence of these signs accordingly. And there is yet another aspect of these bodies with and without navel, marked and unmarked, that I will here discuss. The presence and/or absence of navel locates these bodies in the realm of grotesque realism, as presented by Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, grotesque realism is concerned with the material body with its roots in all that is earthly, or of the earth. In addition, “all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable.”<sup>56</sup> Because of its concentration on the body and the earth, Bakhtin points to the concept of “degradation” as the fundamental principle of grotesque realism. He explains what it means “to degrade” as follows:

To degrade is bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one...Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Dinesen 105.

<sup>55</sup> There is much more to say on the presence and absence of navels within the texts I have chosen. I wanted only to introduce these themes within this chapter. See Chs. 3 and 4 for further discussions of the presence of navel vs. the absence of navel (blank page vs. marked page).

<sup>56</sup> Bakhtin 19. His entire explanation of the concept of grotesque realism can found on pp. 18-26.

<sup>57</sup> Bakhtin 21.



Bakhtin refers to the dual nature of degradation, simultaneously invoking birth (life) and death, as one of “ambivalence” and points to the presence of ambivalence, along with a concern with time, as the two determining traits of grotesque realism.<sup>58</sup>

In light of Bakhtin’s discussion of grotesque realism, and especially degradation, the navel (and the absence of navel) can be read as a grotesque sign, for the navel points to both life and death. It is a reminder of our birth, of our life in the womb, thereby signifying our humanity. Furthermore, because it signifies our humanity, it also reminds us that our lives will one day end, that we will die. Thus, the navel simultaneously points to both the womb and the grave. In addition, the body as the blank page because of the absence of navel, the absence of a mark, also points to both life and death. Again, as I mentioned earlier, I will argue that because the blank page has no mark from which to read/understand, the reader must transform herself or himself into a writer, thereby making a mark and destroying the purity and wholeness of clean, smooth surface.<sup>59</sup> Thus, reading and writing under the sign of the cross, marking the page, brings death to the silence emanating from it. However, within this death there is life, for writing is a creative process, giving birth to a language that was not before present within the silence. Reading and writing under the sign of the cross, then, is a grotesque endeavor.

When I place the textuality of *Written* in the realm of grotesque realism, I am asserting that it occurs within the context, or space, of grotesque realism. Its textual space is thus framed by its grotesque body which can be read by its presence and/or absence of navel. I have already talked about the navel as a grotesque sign which simultaneously places texts in space of the womb<sup>60</sup> and the grave. Other textual spaces which are comparable to the womb is that of

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<sup>58</sup> Bakhtin 24.

<sup>59</sup> See Guilbert & Gubar 14, 20 and Cixous, “The Book of Promethea,” *The Hélène Cixous Reader* 123 for a discussion of the violence and capacity for killing inherent in the act of writing.

<sup>60</sup> See Moore *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspective* 65 and n.22 for the possibility of “homophonic writing” as “an unweaned writing...that threatens the paternal regimen: it seeks to (re)inscribe the (M)other,” (65).

house<sup>61</sup> and car. As represented in *Written*, these spaces both bring comfort as well as are defiled or tainted. In short, all the texts with which I am working fall into one (or several) of the contexts I have here presented: the womb/house/car, the grave, the blank page, the marked (defiled) or unclean page.

Textual context is also affected by the pretexts/pre-texts and subtexts which run throughout these texts and contribute to the overall textuality of these texts. I use John 1.1-18 as subtext to *Written*, for the love relationship between Louise and the narrator, as well as the narrator's own ethical epiphany about her/himself, parallel Word becoming flesh, idea becoming tangible, transcendental melding with sensible.

The final aspect of textuality on which I will focus is the texture of the texts that I am reading and writing. I think of the texture of these texts in both the tactile sense of the word as well as the overall impression or feeling which the text gives me as partner in conversation. The texture of John's prologue and Winterson's *Written on the Body* is Incarnational, for Winterson's text is a re-presentation of what happens when the sensible and transcendental meet to form a singular existence. They both embody the drama of becoming and rebecoming human,<sup>62</sup> for the characters involved must learn and re-learn how to live in the world in which they are placed and encounter situations as they arise in the best ways they know how at any particular moment. When their actions and passions cause them to falter, they reassess the situation and try again.

## Conclusion

In the beginning of this chapter, I presented Ricoeur's idea of text as writing which stands on its own, severed from its creator, and with which no dialogue is possible. It was my intention to build upon this concept of text to develop one which allowed room for the possibility of dialogue

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<sup>61</sup> See Exum 29-31 and 47-50 for an interesting analysis of the role of the house in the Hebrew Scriptures.

<sup>62</sup> I appropriated this idea from Alison Jasper's reading of the Incarnation as "the drama of becoming and remaining human." (See Ch. 4 for bibliographic information.) I prefer becoming and rebecoming because of the back-and-forth implications, rather than reaching a goal and staying there.

with texts. I accomplished this by engaging in a discussion of Derrida's ideas concerning the primacy of speech over writing in Western thought. Derrida argues that speech is not necessarily more present or truthful than writing, that speech is just as 'trace'-ridden as writing. My goal was to demonstrate that writing is just as present as speech was once thought to be. Through this line of thought, I took the first step toward a notion of textuality that enables texts to be viewed as existing with us, human beings, in our world which we refer to as reality.

I next presented ideas concerning texts as representation vs. the everyday world of reality. Once again, I drew from Ricoeur's writings on text and metaphor as phenomena which contribute to, change, and metamorphosize what we deem to be the stability of reality. They accomplish this by producing "emergent meaning" which Ricoeur points to as the main function of metaphor/text. Ricoeur points to the notion of "play" as the mode of being of texts, but I replaced this notion with Scharlemann's discussion of the textuality of texts as 'being(s) there too with' us. A text as a 'being there too with' us in the world has a textual body, a voice, a self, a particular identity. Thus, the concept of the textuality of texts as embodied entities with voices and selves existing in the world with us opened up the possibility of dialogue with texts on textual terms through the practice of reading and writing under the sign of the cross. I also included a discussion of intertextuality which complemented the discussion of the textuality of texts by demonstrating that dialogue (as language recalling, revising, being in conversation) is already present within the medium of the text, thereby further demonstrating the possibility of dialogue with embodied texts via reading and writing under the sign of the cross.

In the final part of the first section, I re-emphasized and further explained why it is important that I view texts as embodied entities with their own voices in the world with us. I asserted that I am not only developing an ethics of reading and writing throughout this thesis but I am also developing an ethics of the body which is concerned with the role and responsibilities of my body as text toward other textual bodies. I also explained that an ethics of reading and writing and the body is first and foremost about an ethics of living in the world. It is my view

that dialogue (that is, at all times being open to learning, gaining knowledge, and loving) is a way in which I can effectively fulfill my responsibilities toward my own body as text and other textual bodies existing in the world.

In the second section of this chapter, I discussed the textuality of Winterson's *Written on the Body*, John 1.1-18, and Isak Dinesen's "The Blank Page." I can encounter these texts using the textuality of the navel as presented by Bal. Their textuality can be explored not only in terms of the navel but also in terms of the absence of navel, which points to the texts as the blank page upon which the reader becomes writer in order to engage the texts in dialogue. In addition, the textual bodies of these texts are grotesque bodies, according to the stipulations set out by Bakhtin. Using Bakhtin's discussion of grotesque realism, I demonstrated that the navel is a grotesque sign, and reading and writing under the sign of the cross is a grotesque process because of the ambivalence and relation to time inherent in both of these concepts. Because I have placed these texts in the space of reading by the grotesque sign of the presence/absence of navel, the context of these texts is in line with the contextual spaces of grotesque realism: such as the womb, the grave, the blank page. After presenting all the contexts in which these texts occur, I continued to explore the textuality of these texts by presenting the various pretexts/pre-texts, subtexts, and textures of them in order to more fully get a feel for the types of textual bodies with which I will be engaging in dialogue. With all this in mind, I will now move into Chapter 2, taking these notions of text and textuality and discussing how I should read and write under the sign of the cross.

## How do I read and write under the sign of the cross?

### Introduction

In Chapter 1, I discussed various critics who explore the question “What is a text?” so that I might build upon their concepts in order to answer the question “What do I read and write under the sign of the cross?”. I greatly depended on Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of the question, but replaced his idea of play as the mode of being of texts with Robert Scharlemann’s discussion of the textuality of texts. Thus, I concluded that texts under the sign of the cross are “beings there too with us” with which we, as readers and writers, may engage in an X-change or dialogue between one textual body and an-other textual body.

I shall return to Ricoeur in this chapter and once again build upon his ideas with the help of other critics. Since I now explore the question “How do I read and write under the sign of the cross?”, I will discuss his theory of interpretation with appropriation as the way one reads a text in order to fulfill the suspended world of the text. Interpretation is a gaining of meaning set within a specific time-frame rather than a continuous creation of meaning, or a poetics of living in the world. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how reading and writing a text can be a poetics, which is dialogue between reader/writer and an-other text(ual body), and why a textual poetics is preferable to a hermeneutics with the central concern of interpretation.

I will next present ideas about reading that do not, strictly speaking, fall under the category of interpretation, but still unwittingly lend themselves to power structures that could prohibit poetical dialogue with texts. In essence, these ways of reading depend on taking a text’s word for it, quite literally, and, in some ways, carry Ricoeurian interpretation to its extreme. I will primarily concentrate on Mark Ledbetter’s way of reading via a narrative’s scar or break in the text which requires him to adopt a confessional and, further, metaphorically sexual relationship with the text. Ledbetter’s aim is to understand the text on its own terms, offering himself, as a reading self, up to be sacrificed in front of the text. He thereby reverses the hierarchy of

text-dependent-upon-reader to one of reader-dependent-upon-text for self-transformation. The reversal is necessary for his purposes but inadequate for my own. A reading and writing under the sign of the cross demonstrates and embodies an interdependence between text and reader/writer, for engaging in a poetical dialogue is both deconstructive and reconstructive of the two selves (text and reader/writer) involved in the process. Reading and writing under the sign of the cross goes beyond both interpretation and understanding of texts by engaging in an interdependent, creative relationship of love through dialogue.

Finally, I will bring the conversation around to my own hermeneutical method of reading and writing under the sign of the cross. With the help of James Boyd White, Roland Barthes, and Thomas Altizer, I will explain my ideas about poetical dialogue between text(ual bodies) and discuss why this way of reading is preferable to both interpretation and understanding of texts. Reading and writing under the sign of the cross is a total exchange (X-change) because I place both my-self and text under erasure. I mark our bodies with the cross, the chiasmus, presenting our-selves as we truly are: both fully present and fully absent, both absolutely empty and absolutely whole. Reader/writer and text complete and consume each other in the process of poetical dialogue because reader/writer and text are always already thoroughly intertwined with each other: separate entities but tangled beyond distinction. Recognition and carrying out of the process of poetical dialogue is an act of love. By loving my-self and the self of an-other (i.e., another text), I engage in a mutually creative and destructive process which is reading and writing under the sign of the cross.

## Against interpretation and denial of dialogue

A religious reading...might recall what is virtually forgotten in the 'logic of opposition': not only that texts do not demand *the* correct interpretation but that interpretation itself is not always the response that the text seeks.<sup>63</sup>

As Detweiler states in the above quote, interpretation may not be the correct tool with which the reader-text relationship should be constructed. But what exactly is interpretation, and, if interpretation is an inappropriate means of approaching a text, what alternative tool would be better or more productive? Paul Ricoeur asserts that interpretation is "the central problem of hermeneutics" for two reasons: 1) "...because the writing-reading relation is not a particular case of the speaking-hearing relation which we experience in the dialogical situation," and 2) "the concept of interpretation seems, at the epistemological level, to be opposed to the concept of explanation."<sup>64</sup> Ricoeur spends almost the entirety of the article working out the second problem of interpretation so that, finally, through an analysis of what constitutes a metaphor and the function of metaphors, he resolves that interpretation is not opposed to explanation but that explanation of metaphor (within a text) plays a vital role in the interpretation of a text as whole.<sup>65</sup> He does not, on the other hand, try to resolve the first problem in the same way that he reasons out the second. On the contrary, while he shows that explanation is already within interpretation, he does not consider the possibility that the speaking-hearing relation is already within the writing-reading relation. Ricoeur takes it for granted that these two relations are inherently different. He maintains that the writing-reading relation is emphatically not dialogical and sets out to demonstrate what, then, the writing-reading relation actually is within the realm of interpretation.

According to Ricoeur, there are two ways of reading: 1) structural explanation, whereby the reader "remain[s] in the suspense of the text, treating it as a worldless and authorless object,"

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<sup>63</sup> Detweiler 33-4.

<sup>64</sup> Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the central problem of hermeneutics" 165.

and 2) interpretation, whereby the reader “lift[s] the suspense and fulfill[s] the text in speech, restoring it to living communication.”<sup>66</sup> Ricoeur prefers the second method of reading, for he asserts that since the text has been authored and given a particular structure, this very form of the text, as writing, “awaits and calls for a reading.”<sup>67</sup> Further, the structure of a text:

is not closed in on itself but opens out onto other things. To read is...to conjoin a new discourse to the discourse of the text. This conjunction of discourses reveals, in the very constitution of the text, an original capacity for renewal which is its open character. Interpretation is the concrete outcome of conjunction and renewal.<sup>68</sup>

Ricoeur is here saying that a text is not a stagnant work which has no reference to anything outside itself. On the contrary, it stands ready to be encountered, to be read, and it is the reader’s job to fulfill the possibilities of the text through the act of reading itself.

So how should the reader read in order to read toward interpretation? Ricoeur coins the term reading as “appropriation” to describe what the reader does with the text so that the text can be brought into present speech and thereby given meaning.<sup>69</sup> The text presents its own world, and the reader apprehends the textual world so that he or she may understand himself or herself in light of the text. The goal of interpretation is not, however, self-understanding, but a realization of the textual world through the reader’s act of reading. The text, in and of itself, cannot realize its own world; it requires the reader’s apprehension or appropriation of the world in order to give the textual world meaning. And so Ricoeur:

the entire theory of hermeneutics consists in mediating this interpretation-appropriation by the series of interpretants which belong to the work of the text

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<sup>65</sup> See Ricoeur 165-181 for the entirety of his argument.

<sup>66</sup> Ricoeur, “What is a text?” 152.

<sup>67</sup> Ricoeur, “What is a text?” 158.

<sup>68</sup> Ricoeur, “What is a text?” 158.

<sup>69</sup> The following summary of Ricoeur’s argument is taken from Ricoeur, “What is a text?” 158-9, 161-2, 164; “Metaphor and the central problem of hermeneutics” 177-8; and “Appropriation” 185.



upon itself. Appropriation loses its arbitrariness insofar as it is the recovery of that which is at work, in labour, within the text. What the interpreter says is a re-saying which reactivates what is said by the text.<sup>70</sup>

He emphasizes that a text cannot mean whatever a reader wants it to mean precisely because the text dictates its own structure which the reader interprets in light of the apprehension of the textual world. Again, as Ricoeur puts it: “to understand oneself in front of a text is quite the contrary of projecting oneself and one’s own beliefs and prejudices; it is to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself.”<sup>71</sup> I think that Ricoeur’s adamancy concerning a change of the reader but a constancy of text can be understood in light of his reference to avoiding arbitrariness in the above quotation.<sup>72</sup> He wants a text to have a particular meaning because a text is authored by a single person with a particular structure in mind. Furthermore, since he believes that the relationship between reader and text is not a dialogical relationship because an author is absent from the written text, he must also assert that a text’s meaning cannot be in the process of constant creation and destruction because its only author left it in its present state. In other words, a text can only give what its structure contains, for the author is not present to answer questions and promote meaning which the text itself does not contain. This notion of interpretation and gaining meaning assumes that a given text has only one author, that is, the person who wrote it.<sup>73</sup> Text and reader are independent beings, meeting each other on individual terms during a specific time and at a specific place. Ricoeur’s

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<sup>70</sup> Ricoeur, “What is a text?” 164.

<sup>71</sup> Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the central problem of hermeneutics” 178. Cf. “Appropriation” 182-3.

<sup>72</sup> See Bal, *Reading “Rembrandt”* 13-15, for a similar discussion on the possibility of interpretation and avoiding arbitrariness. Cf. Detweiler 36, 55 for his assertion that religious reading “tame[s] this tendency” to make meaning (because a text might not always call for it); however, he also affirms that a religious reading would “aid the reading community’s participation in the construction of myths and rituals against chaos,” (36). Detweiler does not seem to notice the inherent contradiction between, in a sense, both cultivating arbitrariness and fighting against it.

<sup>73</sup> For a different sort of “single-author theory” see, for example, Jorge Luis Borges’ short story, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in Borges 36-44. The gist of the argument surrounding this piece is that we are all the same author because every person is necessarily influenced by every other person, no matter where we are located in history.

hermeneutics does not have room for constant and mutual poiesis, constant and mutual creation and destruction.

Ricoeur believes that because a written text is cut off from its author, who is its original audience, a reader must interpret a text through “appropriation,” thereby making the suspended, unfulfilled text (i.e., the text on its own, without reader) meaningful for the present reader.<sup>74</sup> Thus, appropriation is an event, a bringing into meaning something which is meaningless without the action of the reader. So how does a reader perform this appropriation? Following Gadamer, Ricoeur points to the notion of “play” as the mode of being of appropriation. The concept of play is no different from what one would expect; Ricoeur even demonstrates it by speaking in terms of childhood games. As a playful reader, I completely set aside my-self “in order to receive, as in play, the self conferred by the work itself.”<sup>75</sup> This is an important step in the playful process, this relinquishing of the self, for, as I stated earlier, projection of the self into a text is a big no-no in Ricoeurian hermeneutics. Why? There are several reasons, not least of which is the avoidance of arbitrariness which I discussed above. In addition, Ricoeur believes that a conscious giving-up of the self is the only way in which a reader may gain new ways of understanding him- or her-self in light of the projected world of the text.<sup>76</sup> If one does not relinquish oneself but, instead, reads oneself into the text, Ricoeur, using Freudian language, claims that the reader is guilty of “narcissism of the reader.”<sup>77</sup> To put it another way, a reader refusing to give up the self might be accused of solipsism or selfishness.

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<sup>74</sup> The following discussion of appropriation and play as the mode of being of appropriation is summarized from Ricoeur, “Appropriation” 182-93.

<sup>75</sup> Ricoeur, “Appropriation” 190.

<sup>76</sup> See Detweiler 126 for an extreme version of Ricoeur’s relinquishing of self in reading as appropriation: “Would a perfect reading in fact destroy one’s individuality?...If the perfect reading...were of the divine mind, one would no doubt succumb to that totality and have one’s individuality lost in the omniscience. The paradox of reading to achieve ultimate knowledge and power is that full success would mean the sacrifice of the self. In this sense, reading can be a nihilating activity.” I agree that reading can (and possibly should) be a nihilating activity to some extent; however, I do not think that one’s self must necessarily be totally destroyed with a “perfect” reading.

<sup>77</sup> Ricoeur, “Appropriation” 191.

Contra Ricoeur, I suggest that I, as reader/writer, come clean from the beginning and recognize that I stand to gain personally from an encounter with an-other text. Just as the text, according to Ricoeur, stands to gain from my reading/writing and personal reaction (and repassion), my world as reader/writer is also fulfilled within the context of encounter with an-other. Alone, or apart from an-other text, I cannot and do not make sense because an-other text is always already inside me, and vice versa. I will talk more about selfishness within textual X-change in the final section of this chapter. For now, let us break with Ricoeur and turn to other ways of reading which fancy themselves non-interpretive and end up, in a sense, taking the reception of the text's world to its extreme.

### **Taking the text's word for it (at the expense of reader)**

Whereas Ricoeur moves away from the ultimate end of interpretation as understanding the text,<sup>78</sup> others call for a way of reading as taking the text's word for it, no matter what the cost. This way of reading stems from the assertion that the text, often likened to women throughout history, has been forced into a solely passive position by ourselves as readers. In turn, the reader takes a solely active, penetrative role and inevitably does violence to the text, while he or she (the reader) comes away unmarred. I will primarily focus on Mark Ledbetter, who develops an ethics of reading and writing that proposes an intimate and, further, sexual relationship between reader and text. In so doing, Ledbetter's system succeeds in tipping the balance in the other direction. It promotes sacralizing the text at the expense of the reader, as well as the reader naively claiming innocence (where innocence there is none). The reader is (and, according to Ledbetter, should be) penetrated by the text rather than the other way around. Thus, we have here a one-way street, and all signs point away from the text, toward the reader.

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<sup>78</sup> See Ricoeur, "What is a text?" 158: "understanding the text is not an end in itself...."

In Cheryl Exum's *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*, the final chapter, "Raped by the pen," discusses her idea of literary rape of women (and women's stories) in patriarchal narratives.

Rape in texts and by texts is different from the real thing....But like actual cases of rape, literary rape is difficult to prove. Proving it depends on taking the woman's word for it. Often the question of rape involves the issue of perception.

What a woman experiences as rape may be viewed as something else by a man.<sup>79</sup>

Exum is not alone in her view that taking the victim's word for it is a necessary step in piecing together the entirety of the story. Exum holds the maxim that there are two sides to every story, and it is the feminist reader's job to discover what exactly is the woman/victim's version of the situation, since her side is often readily and easily either glossed over or left out completely.<sup>80</sup> It is not that the woman/victim does not speak or has not always spoken, but that the man/reader does not listen and has not heard. Luce Irigaray, in the second reflection of *Elemental Passions*, writes about the same idea of speaking but not being heard:

And I was speaking, but you did not hear. I was speaking from further than your furthest bounds. Beyond the place you were penetrating to reveal the secret resistance to your tongue. From outside that mouth which you still wanted to give me. And mark it for your own...And it was not that I was withholding myself from you, but that you did not know where to find me. You searched and searched for me, in you. Wanting me still to be virgin material for the building

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<sup>79</sup> Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993) 199. Cf. n. 55 where she quotes Higgins and Silver: "Who gets to tell the story and whose story counts as 'truth' determine the definition of what rape is" in Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda K. Silver, eds. *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia, 1991) 1, italics theirs.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"* 63-9 for her explanation of reading from the victim's perspective which she calls a "poetics of hysterics."

of your world to come...I was speaking, not so that you would stay where you already were, but so that you would move beyond. You did not hear.<sup>81</sup>

The voice in Irigaray's prose, the women discussed by Exum in biblical narrative, and the woman who has been raped are all the same voice, the voice of the victim, and are all saying the same thing: listen to me, and more than that, hear me. Both the utterances and silence of this voice require someone to listen and hear what is actually being said by the presence and absence of words; the voice demands a reader. So too does a text demand a reader who is willing to listen and hear, for the voice of the text is likewise the voice of the victim, and critics such as Ledbetter are determined to provide a proper forum where hearing can happen, as a matter of ethical responsibility.

According to Ledbetter, an ethic of writing "is to discover and to make heard silenced voices," and an ethic of reading "is to hear those voices."<sup>82</sup> In other words, Ledbetter is taking the text's word for it. He accomplishes his ethic of reading and writing by respecting a textual distraction, or narrative scar.<sup>83</sup> He reasons that places within the narrative which do not fit neatly within its entirety (i.e., textual distractions or narrative scars) might be "moment[s] of ethical discovery" because the reader is taken off guard and forced to reassess his or her expectations in light of the narrative's disruptive presentation.<sup>84</sup> His ethics of reading and writing demands that the reader takes these breaks in the text seriously, avoiding the tendency to try to make sense of them apart from the text itself. Again, taking the text's word for it means hearing the text, even if (or, perhaps, especially if) one must try to hear absence (i.e., silenced voices) and reveal the absence as absence, thereby "look[ing] for ways to tell [the] narrative's story from the peripheral

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<sup>81</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still (New York: Routledge, 1992) 9-10. For a similar line of thinking concerning treatment of victims in pain, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford, 1985) 6-11. Scarry argues that putting pain into language involves a trust in the language of either the person in pain or the person speaking on behalf of the one in pain.

<sup>82</sup> Mark Ledbetter, *Victim and the Postmodern Narrative, or Doing Violence to the Body: An Ethic of Reading and Writing* (London: Macmillan, 1996) 1.

<sup>83</sup> Ledbetter 1-2.

<sup>84</sup> Ledbetter 2.

perspective, that is, by presenting absence.”<sup>85</sup> The text as victim has a voice which either rings clearly or silently; the reader must work to understand both levels of volume.

So far, Ledbetter has not radically differed from Ricoeur, for Ricoeur, with the concept of the presentation of a text’s world to the reader, would agree with Ledbetter and the others about taking a text’s word for it. Furthermore, Ledbetter directly draws from Ricoeur and adopts the language of play.<sup>86</sup> However, unlike Ricoeur, Ledbetter moves away from the hermeneutical practice of acquiring meaning from a text into one which advocates understanding a text as its primary goal. Recall that Ricoeur saw understanding a text as a step in the process of self-understanding in front of the world of the text. Ledbetter, on the other hand, concentrates more on the text itself and subverts understanding the reader’s self to understanding the text’s “otherness.”

Understanding the text is about being intimate with the text...and ties reader and text inextricably together. Understanding a text has the potential of giving priority to a text’s otherness, to indecipherability. A reader may understand that s/he cannot know what a text means or that a text does not mean anything.<sup>87</sup>

With this move toward understanding the text, Ledbetter almost takes a focus on the reader’s self completely out of the picture. He elevates and prioritizes the self of the text. He claims that narrative scarring is ethically most effective when the reader completely relinquishes his or her “current story” and replaces it with the one offered by the text, or, to go further, “when the story [i.e., the text] *takes* from me my current story, replacing it with a different one.”<sup>88</sup> His emphasis here on the word “take” is significant. Ledbetter, as reader, presents himself to the text, exposing and making himself vulnerable. It is a self-sacrifice. Whereas Ricoeur calls for a putting the self aside and allowing the text to enter (in order to cultivate the reader’s self), Ledbetter espouses

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<sup>85</sup> Ledbetter 6.

<sup>86</sup> See Ledbetter 5.

<sup>87</sup> Ledbetter 143.

<sup>88</sup> Ledbetter, his emphasis.

self-obliteration in the name of assuming a “posture” of “confession” before the text as a conscious recognition of “need.”<sup>89</sup> As reader, my-self is both wholly dependent upon and destroyed in favor of the text as other.

As an extension of his use of body metaphor<sup>90</sup>, he claims that “nakedness is an appropriate metaphor for how we should approach a text, confessionally.”<sup>91</sup> For Ledbetter, to stand naked before a text is the most effective way to make oneself vulnerable before a text, willfully offering oneself up to be scarred. Since we oftentimes already think of the reader-text relationship in terms of a heterosexual, male-female relationship (the reader being male and penetrator, the text being female and penetrated), his call for nakedness before the text is not an incongruous leap. By reversing the sexual roles of reader and text, whereby the reader consciously makes him/herself passive, he reasons that it is also possible to counteract the potential for sexual assault on the text – which is likely within the reader as penetrator metaphor, especially when or “if the text resists imposition of an ‘expected’ story [i.e., contains disruptions to the conventional master plot].”<sup>92</sup> Notice the parallel here with Exum. Ledbetter is pointing to a rape of the text when, as readers, we actively try to make meaning rather than passively receive what the text actually confers.<sup>93</sup> Standing naked before the text and adopting a sexual role other than the reader’s own is, for Ledbetter, an effective way of “discover[ing] new ways of reading and being read by the text and therefore, of understanding the text,” whereas refusing to take on

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<sup>89</sup> Ledbetter 144. This notion of the reader needing the text is parallel to my thoughts on selfishness, as in I, as reader, desire encounter with the text because I both need and desire to cultivate my-self through the reception of the text as other, as well as give my-self to an-other (i.e., make the mark upon an-other). See below for a more detailed explanation of selfishness.

<sup>90</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Ledbetter’s reasoning behind his use of body metaphor.

<sup>91</sup> Ledbetter 144.

<sup>92</sup> Ledbetter 146.

<sup>93</sup> There is an interesting similarity here between the rape of the text which occurs when we, as readers, refuse to take the text’s word for it and the notion that torture equals truth which critics have denounced as ludicrous. See, for example, Foucault 35-42, Scarry 12, and Page DuBois, *Torture and Truth* (New York: Routledge, 1991). It is also noteworthy to add that, while, as Foucault writes, torture was denounced as “Gothic” in the late eighteenth century, our world today sustains the practice in both overt and covert ways. We are not as civilized as we think ourselves to be.

an unfamiliar sexuality hinders “the limitless possibilities of understanding a text.”<sup>94</sup> In other words, remaining within my-self, keeping my-self fully present and intact restricts the many lessons to be learned from a total reception of the text and destruction of my-self.

Ledbetter acknowledges the risk involved in a destruction of one’s self but does not sympathize with the fear this destruction may invoke. On the contrary, he insists that self-destruction is a necessary step in the realization that “I can only tell my story by reference to the other’s.”<sup>95</sup> Here, once again, we have a solid assertion that I as reader am completely dependent upon the text as other. I my-self as text, my own personal story, does not even make sense without an acknowledged presence and legitimacy of the other.

To confess our need for the other, in particular when such an encounter can be self-destructive to personal identity, often asks for more vulnerability on the part of the critic than I am willing to offer...If we believe that narrative can be read from an ethical perspective, the time has come for a *loss* – a ‘giving up’ – of control, for a literal sacrifice of self to text, for an admission/a confession of the inadequacies of our own personal narratives to have the final word in terms of any text’s meaning.<sup>96</sup>

Within this quote lies the embodiment of Ledbetter’s argument. I my-self as reader cannot assume that I possess absolute knowledge. I must necessarily lend credence to the presence of the text as other, for I my-self am wholly dependent upon the other. Thus, I must sacrifice myself in order to properly receive the text as other and recognize that the text may very well hold information or knowledge of which I am unaware/have not yet learned or come across. The text can take care of itself, but I am a fool if I believe I can do likewise.

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<sup>94</sup> Ledbetter 146-7. Cf. Detweiler 35, for a related line of thinking within his concept of reading religiously, “It [reading religiously] would be religious in its very openness to others; its willingness to accommodate and adapt; its readiness to entertain the new, the invention, while honouring the old, the convention; its celebration of the text’s possibilities rather than a delimiting of them.”

<sup>95</sup> Ledbetter 147.

<sup>96</sup> Ledbetter 147.



I am not completely in disagreement with Ledbetter's arguments; however, I think that he makes several dangerous assumptions and has developed a one-sided argument in spite of himself. For example, he is adamant about the fact that I my-self, as reader, am dependent upon the text as other, and with this assertion I entirely agree. I am not able to make sense of or understand myself apart from an-other. However, if this is the case, would it not also be true that the self of an-other necessarily depends on my-self as other? In other words, if I am dependent upon an-other, then is an-other not dependent upon me as well? Rather than a one-way dependence, can we not say that there exists a two-way dependence, an interdependence between reader and text/text and reader? After all, a text is present to be read, and this includes both my-self as text and an-other as text. Furthermore, a recognition of interdependence is a recognition of interactivity and interpassivity: both action and passion.

It is interdependence that also helps one to avoid falling into a second trap: that of mere reversal of reader and textual roles. Ledbetter appeals to postmodernism throughout the entirety of the book, but he fails to deconstruct the stereotypical sexual metaphor which he evokes in order to read and write against it. Instead, he only reverses the metaphor, having the text penetrate the reader, thereby keeping it essentially intact but going the opposite way. I do not think that reversal solves the problem of the reader-text relationship. Is sacrifice and destruction of the reader's self any "better" or more ethical than a sacrifice of the text against which Ledbetter speaks? It seems to me that violence is violence is violence, no matter which way it is directed.

A recognition of the violence still inherent in his ethical system brings me to my final point. I do not think that violence can be avoided and to suppose otherwise is to assume innocence, which might be the most grievous error of them all. Ledbetter repeatedly speaks out against implications of power and playing power games,<sup>97</sup> but he has not rid his system of a rigid hierarchy and power play within this hierarchy. The text now takes precedence over the reader.

The text has power over the reader. The text does violence to the reader. Furthermore, and this is my point, violence is inherent within the very act of reading and writing, whether the reader/writer likes it or not. As Derrida puts it: “How can one text...give or present another to be read, without touching it, without saying anything about it, practically without referring to it?”<sup>98</sup> Violence is inevitable because when we speak about reading and writing, we are speaking about encounter between one text and an-other. Violence, destruction, alteration is not so much a problem as a matter-of-fact. But these things do go both ways, there is a cross(ing) present within; thus, where there is violence, destruction, and alteration, there might also be creation, reconstruction, and re-formation. When something is destroyed, the thing as it formerly was is no longer; however, there is a new thing present in its place. The thing that was is now something else. This is the nature of poetics. Reading and writing under the sign of the cross recognizes the omni-presence of both creation and destruction within the process of textual encounter and works, by means of interactivity and interpassivity, to maintain a dialogical X-change which is productive and re-productive from text to text.

### **Reading and writing under the sign of the cross: recognition, action, and passion**

...whenever we speak or write, whether we know it or not and for good or ill, we contribute to the creation of a culture, and we do so both in the way we reconstitute our language and in the reason we establish with the other person who is our reader. Every way of reading is a way of being and acting in the world.<sup>99</sup>

In the above quotation, White succinctly summarizes what, in the end, is the actual outcome of reading and writing; that is, they are, together, a way of living in the world. White does not, as I

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Ledbetter 7, 131, and *n. 6* in Chapter 2 on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

<sup>98</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Living On: Border-lines,” *Deconstruction and Criticism*, trans. James Hulbert, ed. Bloom et al., (New York: Seabury, 1979), 80.

do, appropriate the metaphor of the cross or *chiasmus* in order to symbolize or embody a particular way of reading and writing which is a way of living in the world; however, because he is talking about exchange, or X-change, our separate discourses essentially come from the same place. Thus, in this section, I will draw from White in order to better contextualize my arguments. In addition, I will also rely heavily on Altizer whose writings directly make use of the symbol of the cross in the form of *coincidentia oppositorum*,<sup>100</sup> or coincidence of opposites, but does not invoke the language of reading and writing as metaphors for living in the world. In fact, it seems that Altizer is not at all concerned with living in the world, for he is largely focused on apocalyptic narrative, which is ultimately about the destruction of this world in order to give birth to a new form of existence, an-“other” world. The point is, though, that White, Altizer, and myself all emphasize and demonstrate X-change between reader and text/text and reader, in one form or another. Furthermore, on top of the basic idea of X-change, I will apply the terms recognition, action, and passion, which are all present within our work. Briefly stated, when I inscribe the cross over my body and over the other-texts that I read and write, I recognize(tion) the connection and interdependence between my-self as text and an-other as text; I act(ion) by reading and writing myself and an-other in light of this recognition; and I pass(ion) by allowing my-self to be read and written upon by an-other-text.<sup>101</sup> Recognition, action, and passion, together, recontextualize the cross. Recontextualization of the cross is an embodiment of love.

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<sup>99</sup> James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (London: The University of Chicago, 1984) 21.

<sup>100</sup> For detailed explanations of his use of the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, see Thomas J. J. Altizer, “The Sacred and the Profane: A Dialectical Understanding of Christianity,” in Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966) and Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus* (London: SCM, 1998), xiii-xxvii.

<sup>101</sup> See Meese 145 for a discussion of the works of Luce Irigaray and Jane Gallop in which their ideas parallel my own concepts of recognition, inter-action, and inter-passion: “This ‘homology’ of male intellectuals, symbolizing their power in the world at large, constantly presents itself to the feminist critic as a reminder of what we cannot pluralistically join or univocally replace. By unveiling the male-affiliative nature of social and intellectual institutions of culture, Irigaray (and Gallop) call for a true hetero-sexuality or an ‘other bi-sexuality’ that ‘pursues, loves and accepts’ all that has traditionally been fixed in oppositional choices. In such a move, feminist criticism frees itself and invites critical theory in general, and deconstructive practice in particular, to make a similar choice.” [The internal quotations were taken from Jane Gallop, *The Daughter’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell

I, as both text and reader, recognize my connectedness to an-other text through language.

White, referring to the subject of his work, states the above as follows:

To put it in a single word, I would say that our subject is rhetoric, if by that is meant the study of the ways in which character and community – and motive, value, reason, social structure, everything, in short, that makes a culture – are defined and made real in performances of language. Whenever you speak, you define a character for yourself and for at least one other – your audience – and make a community at least between the two of you; and you do this in a language that is of necessity provided to you by others and modified in your use of it.<sup>102</sup>

White's comments can as easily be applied to other texts, such as written or visual, for, no matter what media constitute a text, I, as reader, am influenced by it, just as the "author" was influenced by (an) other(s). When I approach or encounter an-other text from a position of agnosticism (i.e., not knowing), I simultaneously experience the text through my-self (which is through what makes-up my-self, such as my own experience, knowledge, etc.), for I cannot escape my-self, while also crossing my-self out, or putting my-self under erasure, so that I might embody the recognition that I am not only connected to an-other (thus, an-other's presentation to my-self can be understood and learned from) but that I am also dependent upon an-other for the construction and de-construction of my-self. In other words, connectedness through language goes beyond the fact that I appropriate the same language as an-other. Connectedness through language also

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University, 1982) 150.] Cf. Hélène Cixous', "The Newly Born Woman," *The Hélène Cixous Reader* 41 for a similar notion of "other bisexuality": "Bisexuality – that is to say the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the non-exclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this 'permission' one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body." Cf. Alison Jasper, *The Shining Garment of the Text* 229 for a discussion of Word becoming flesh (Jn 1.14) as indicative of Julia Kristeva's notion of the heterogeneity of subjectivity, as well as pointing to the Word as involved in the maternal realm through abjection and *jouissance*.

<sup>102</sup> White x-xi. Later on, after explaining his use of the words "language" and "culture" interchangeably, White clarifies his concentration on the all-pervasive nature of language as follows: "...I do not mean to suggest that every question is merely a question of language or that by speaking the right way we can make anything come to pass..." (21). I too agree that everything is not simply a question of language, but I, as

means that I am dependent upon an-other and recognize this so that I might undergo metamorphosis by means of an-other's presentation of his/her/its world to me.

I have here purposely used Ricoeur's language of the presentation of a text's world so that I, as reader, might gain (e.g., self-understanding) from it, for I agree with this line of thinking. However, I do not think that the process must stop here, for, rather than asserting that the ultimate goal is self-understanding, I wish to go farther by adding that the ultimate goal is X-change, which is the embodiment of dialogue. Nevertheless, Ricoeur also argues that the text is dependent upon my-self as well, and again, I agree. I call this recognition of two-way dependence "inter-dependence" between one text and an-other, for both texts require (desire) to engage in reading and to be read. For example, Altizer, referring to a voice that is speaking, states the following:

Speech realizes the self-identity of voice, and realizes it by bringing voice's identity as voice and voice alone to an end. That end occurs in hearing, and only in hearing does voice realize its self-identity. Voice, however, does not simply perish in hearing. It far rather transcends itself, and it transcends itself by ceasing to be voice alone, by ceasing to be alone and apart as a voice which is only voice. *When voice passes into hearing, it is precisely thereby that it fully realizes itself, that it realizes its own self-identity.* For it is in hearing, and in hearing alone, that voice becomes pure act.<sup>103</sup>

Voice and hearing are inextricably intertwined. While a voice having been heard is no longer a voice (but now is an event of hearing, for voice having been heard is destroyed), voice requires hearing in order to be fully itself. To put it another way, this time employing Ricoeurian terminology, a text is unfulfilled without the presence of a reader to read it. Text as other is dependent upon a reader. But that is not all. Notice Altizer's statement that a voice "becomes

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does he, stand by the notion that through language we, as readers and writers, both change and are changed by our world (and the people in it) as text.

pure act” through the process of speaking and being heard. What this says to me is that Altizer is moving beyond a voice (or a text, if you will) quite passively only requiring to be heard (read), but that voice also requires to be heard so that it can itself become act by acting on the one who hears. Thus, hearing is only hearing when it hears voice, and voice is only voice when it is heard. The two require the reception of the other to fully embody themselves. Again, as Altizer puts it:

Voice enacts itself in hearing, and it enacts itself by embodying itself, by embodying itself in hearing. Then hearing becomes pure hearing, and it becomes pure hearing by wholly embodying voice. Hearing is voice, is voice which realizes itself, and realizes itself in the act of hearing. When hearing realizes itself as pure hearing, or passes into pure hearing, it thereby embodies voice. But hearing’s embodiment of voice is also and simultaneously voice’s embodiment of itself. For voice itself speaks in hearing just as hearing speaks when it fully hears. And the speech of hearing is the voice of speech, is the voice of that speech which is fully actual and real.<sup>104</sup>

Hearing and voice, or reader and text, become one an-other during the process of embodying themselves. Or, to put it another way, the self of one becomes the self of the other (and vice versa) so that the self of the one and the self of the other might fully become their separate (but completely intertwined) selves. They are, in this way, wholly inter-dependent upon one an-other for self-realization or self-actualization. And since the goal is for both selves to be fully actualized, I submit that the process of one self recognizing the inter-dependence upon the self of an-other is a self-centered (i.e., selfish) process.

When I say that recognition of inter-dependence is a selfish process, I mean that it is an act of self-preservation. I have both need and desire to de-construct and re-construct both my-self

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<sup>103</sup> Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (London: Harper & Row, 1977) 67, my emphasis.

<sup>104</sup> Altizer, *Self-Embodiment* 67.

and an-other, and I do so in light of, or with reference to, my-self. I encounter texts through the medium of my-self. John Berger, addressing the nature of the act of looking, puts it as follows:

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe....We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach....We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves.<sup>105</sup>

When I look at or read an-other, I do so in relation to my-self because I cannot understand an-other outside my-self. Certainly, the text may present new information to me of which I was previously unaware, but in order to understand the new information, I must relate it to my existing body of knowledge which I have already gathered from other texts. And this leads me to my second point. Recognition of inter-dependence between my-self and an-other is a self-centered process (thus an act of self-preservation) because an-other (or countless “others”) are always already present within my-self, just as countless others are always already present within the self of an-other.<sup>106</sup> Thus, both my-self and the self of an-other require each other, are inter-dependent upon the selves of each other, in order to engage in the ongoing process of self-construction or self-fulfillment. In other words, the self-identities of both my-self and the self of an-other are wholly inter-dependent upon each other. As Altizer puts it:

...self-identity...becomes identical with self-negation. We could even say that identity only becomes manifest and actual as self-identity through the self-embodiment of otherness, identity could not stand out from itself, hence self-identity would then be neither manifest nor actual. Nor can self-identity appear and be real apart from identity’s own embodiment of otherness. But when this

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<sup>105</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972) 8-9.

<sup>106</sup> I am here reminded of what Derrida, in defense of writing against speech, says of these two phenomena: “Discontinuity, delay, heterogeneity, and alterity already were working upon the voice, producing it from its first breath as a system of differential traces, that is as writing before the letter.” Derrida, “Qual Quelle: Valéry’s Sources,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone, 1982) 291. Derrida is

self-embodiment is realized in identity's own act, an act establishing or realizing self-identity, then self-identity is identical with self-negation.<sup>107</sup>

Altizer is arguing that the only way actual self-identity can be achieved is through the embodiment of an-other (as text), and, therefore, a self-negation of my-self (as reader). I must cross out my-self in order to receive the self of an-other, thereby fully embodying or actualizing my own self. When I cross out my-self, I am both fully present and fully absent, and I cross out my-self because I recognize my dependence upon an-other in order for my-self to be fulfilled. Likewise, I must add that an-other crosses it-self out when it projects it-self into me so that its own self might also be fulfilled through my-self as other. We have here a double-cross, or a two-way crossing: a simultaneous self-negation in order to actualize a simultaneous self-fulfilling. Since both selves take part in this process of self-presenting and self-absenting, this process is a two-way selfish or self-centered process because of the two-way self-emptying (self-destruction) and self-reception (self-creation) in order to achieve self-preservation through both self-construction and self-deconstruction. Self-construction and self-deconstruction take place through inter-action and inter-passion between reader and text. Reader and text engage in this process because of recognition of inter-dependence upon each other.

Within the above explication of recognition, I often touched on the ideas of inter-action and inter-passion, for the three terms are intertwined. Once I recognize inter-dependence, then I, as reader, engage in the process of reading which necessarily involves both inter-action and inter-passion. Both these terms hold at least two meanings. Inter-action holds within it both the sense of "encounter" and "activity". Encounter is quite simply the meeting of two separate entities, in this case, reader and text. White, when presenting his ideas about a way of reading, says the following about the encounter between reader and text:

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pointing out that writing, which was seen as inferior to speaking, is actually already always within speaking; thus, speech is just as 'contaminated' as writing was thought to be.

<sup>107</sup> Altizer, *Self-Embodiment* 47-8.



...what I mean by a way of reading is not a value-free technique of investigation – one that can be applied, without itself being changed, to whatever text comes along. What I mean...is a way of learning and responding that is itself deeply informed by, and in important senses derived from, the texts engaged with [when one reads]....Reading is an engagement of the mind that changes the mind....<sup>108</sup>

White is essentially saying that one cannot predict the outcome of reader meeting with, or encountering, a text. He emphasizes that it is (or, maybe should be) primarily the text which dictates the way it is (or should be) read. He, like Ricoeur, points to the reader's self as the ultimate target at which the reader should aim in order to *enact* change or, in Ricoeur's terms, an expanded self-understanding. I would here add that with reading under the sign of the cross, or reading as X-change, the self of the text, as well, is (should be) changed during the encounter with the reader.

Once we began to use the language of "change," we approached the second sense of inter-action, which is activity or, more precisely, inter-activity. Text and reader (becoming writer), both presenting or emptying themselves, (inter)act upon each-other, for they both engage in a poetics of construction (creation) and de-construction (destruction) of each-other as they read and write in order to gain self-identity (a self-identity which recognizes and *enacts* this poetics through an-other). So Altizer:

Only when identity becomes other than itself does it become manifest or actual as self-identity, for only thereby can identity pass beyond or transcend itself. Then if self-identity is understood as self-realization, it can be so understood only by apprehending self-realization as self-negation, a self-negation wherein identity loses and leaves behind all simple identity with itself.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> White ix-x.

<sup>109</sup> Altizer, *Self-Embodiment* 48.

In order to enact a making of self-identity, both reader and text must be willing to recognize and receive an-other into their-selves. Without actively recognizing and receiving an-other, one's self will remain stagnant and incomplete. I depend upon an-other to bring me beyond my-self, to both construct and de-construct what I already perceive my-self to be. And, as Altizer affirms, I, as reader, do this through self-negation, by putting my-self under erasure, by recognizing and enacting a passive position of reception with respect to an-other who is my partner in the reading process (i.e., the text).

Once again, the passive position is a position of passion, of inter-passion between my-self as reader and an-other as text. In the first sense, inter-passion can mean "passivity" on both the part of the reader and text. As reader, I actively cross my-self out, or make the mark upon my-self, in order to receive an-other, thus making my-self fully present and fully absent, fully active and fully passive. When White speaks about changes in language which are brought about through textual action (e.g., the presence of a text or the occurrence of an event), he argues that, as readers, we inevitably "form" and "are formed" by things such as events in world because these events change our language, and we are part of the world and influenced by our language. .

...at every stage the change [in language] is effected, knowingly or not, by the action of individual people, who at once form and are formed by their language and the events of their world. When language changes meaning, the world changes meaning, and we are part of the world.<sup>110</sup>

Because we both, "knowingly or not," change our language and world and are changed by these, White points to a necessary recognition of an active passivity on the part of us as readers and writers. In addition, the text, too, takes on a passive role because we as readers contribute meaning to the text in the act of reading. Remember that since I, my-self, am both fully present and fully absent in the engagement of reading under the sign of the cross, I read from my-self as well as receive the self of the text. Thus, since I read from my-self, I might contribute a presence

of meaning to the text of which both it and the “author” were previously unaware. I too am writer of an-other text. Both the text and my-self become more full-filled within the actively passive process of reading and writing under the sign of the cross.

I think of inter-passion in a second sense of passion as “desire,” again, both on the part of the reader and text. To think of reading in terms of desire is essentially to ask the question, “Why do I read and write under the sign of the cross?” I desire an encounter with an-other. I desire to make meaning (i.e., engage in text-making) in this world. I desire to move from a position of not knowing (i.e., a position of agnosticism) to a position of knowing, while, all the time, recognizing that I do not and cannot know everything. I desire to move from reader to writer. Therefore, I continue to encounter the world as text agnostically, which is to consistently be open to change and fluidity, which is to consistently be open to poetics, which is to consistently be open to creation and destruction, to construction and de-construction. I desire, in other words, X-change. I desire dialogue.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter with a presentation of Paul Ricoeur’s ideas concerning the method and purpose of interpretation of texts. Ricoeur argues that since a text is authored by a particular person with a particular structure in mind, the text has its own unique “world” to offer. Likewise, a text requires a reader to apprehend this world. Ricoeur names this action “appropriation,” for the reader both fulfills the world of the text and understands him/herself in light of the structure or world offered by the text. Ricoeur emphasizes that understanding oneself in front of a text is not the same as projecting one’s own ideas or desires into the act of interpretation, which would produce an arbitrary or narcissistic reading.

I next discussed Mark Ledbetter’s hermeneutics of reading by the narrative’s “scar,” which turns out to be parallel to Ricoeurian hermeneutics, though their terminology differs

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<sup>110</sup> White 4.

considerably. Like Ricoeur, Lebetter encourages taking a text's word for it, or receiving the world conferred by the text, while putting one's own self aside. However, Ledbetter returns to the language of understanding the text and rejects the idea that a reader fulfills the text through the act of reading, or even that the text needs us at all. Instead, he argues that we, as readers, need the text. We need to understand the text in every way, the world it presents as well as its unspoken world, the world that gets left out in the silence and pain of absence. He claims that readers have done violence to the text for too long; thus, readers should sacrifice themselves and their own interests to hearing silenced voices within texts.

Both of these methods attempt to be "selfless" in the sense that they deny that the reader's self should affect the text being read. Ricoeur struggles against arbitrariness, and Ledbetter against violence done to the text. In the third section of this chapter, I talk about reading and writing under the sign of the cross as guided by three performances: recognition, action, and passion. As reader and writer, it is to my advantage to recognize my dependence on an-other text, to inter-act with an-other text according to this recognition, and to desire the reception of an-other text so that I might cultivate my-self through this poetic process. Both my-self and an-other text stand to gain from my reading, for reading performs a two-way realization of textual worlds—both the world of my-self and the world of an-other—because as texts, we are always already inside one another. Similarly, writing is an act of listening to other texts which come from both within and from without, both inside and outside my-self as writer. When I mark the blank page, I engage in a creative and destructive process which provocatively changes my-self and an-other text and which, in turn, offers its-self up to be read and written upon by an-other reader and writer. Reading and writing are cyclical actions and passions which occur among selves living in the world who engage in this metamorphosizing process because they love themselves and each other.

## Incarnation, or, the Drama of Becoming and Re-becoming (Human): A reading and writing of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*

This creation would be our opportunity, from the humblest detail of everyday life to the “grandest,” by means of the opening of a *sensible transcendental* that comes into being through us, of which *we would be* the mediators and bridges. Not only in mourning for the dead God of Nietzsche, not waiting passively for the god to come, but by conjuring him up among us, within us, as resurrection and transfiguration of blood, of flesh, through a language and an ethics that is ours.

– from Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.129

And the Word became Flesh.

– John 1.14

### Introduction

In the second part of Alison Jasper's *The Shining Garment of the Text: Gendered Readings of John's Prologue*,<sup>111</sup> she gives three different readings of the prologue, placing the third within the context of Julia Kristeva's writings, in particular, the notion of the *sujet en procès*.<sup>112</sup> Jasper summarizes the themes of Kristeva's “theoretical work” as follows:

What Kristeva constructs...is a description of ‘subjects’ who, as interpreters of their own lives as of the texts they read, are involved in an intertextuality which is characterized by multiplicity. This multiplicity – or heterogeneity – is not limited to multiple elements within the linguistic/symbolic realm but also involves the drives, needs and pleasures of the embodied, speaking subject itself.<sup>113</sup>

Simply put, the term *sujet en procès* describes an individual who is affected by and contributes to the many and various texts which exist both from without and from within the individual. In

<sup>111</sup> Alison Jasper, *The Shining Garment of the Text: Gendered Readings of John's Prologue* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

<sup>112</sup> See pp. 212-21 and n.17 in *The Shining Garment of the Text* for a detailed discussion of this term. Cf. Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. A. Golhammer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

other words, the *sujet en procès* is constantly becoming and re-becoming (human, or actualized) by reading and writing the texts which present themselves to the individual. To partake in the inter-action and inter-passion of reading and writing texts, as well as to recognize multiplicity, is to engage in the process of love, “the sort of love by means of which the creation and sustaining of individual human subjects is made possible.”<sup>114</sup> This is the love of reading and writing under the sign of the cross, of participating in dialogue with my-self and an-other or others.<sup>115</sup>

Jasper argues that, like the journey of the *sujet en procès*, the story of the Incarnation (John 1.1-18), “quite apart from its ‘political’ ramifications within the early Christian Church’s doctrine of the two natures, is in some ways representative of the drama of becoming – and remaining – human.”<sup>116</sup> Thus, becoming and re-becoming (or remaining) human is an incarnational process that occurs under the sign of the chiasmus, or X, since it involves both creation and destruction, separation and integration. The divine Word (λόγος) becomes embodied, becomes human flesh (σάρξ), thereby “defiling” the divine and “sanctifying” the mortal.<sup>117</sup> These two seemingly opposite entities paradoxically meld to become one, resulting in a third manifestation which is the Incarnation, the being of Jesus Christ.<sup>118</sup> Thus, the Incarnation

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<sup>113</sup> Jasper, *The Shining Garment of the Text* 213-14.

<sup>114</sup> Jasper, *The Shining Garment of the Text* 214.

<sup>115</sup> See Antje Lindenmeyer, “Postmodern Concepts of the Body in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*,” *Feminist Review* 63 (1999): 48-63. In her conclusion, Lindenmeyer argues that *Written*, “opens up the classical dichotomies between wholeness and body parts, body surface and interiority in order to exceed them in a concept of the body that is fluid, subject to change and resignification, yet held together by fragile and always endangered connections within the body or between different bodies...theorizing the female body...as a multiplicity of parts and changeable surfaces, held together not by discursive regulations, but by forces of connection” (60). Lindenmeyer’s reading is parallel to a recognition of the *sujet en procès* within both *Written* and John’s prologue.

<sup>116</sup> Jasper, *The Shining Garment of the Text* 221.

<sup>117</sup> I have put the words “defiling” and “sanctifying” in quotations because I recognize that the Word and the flesh do not stand alone as separate and opposite entities, enclosed upon themselves and offering only one attribute, either “good” or “evil.” See *The Shining Garment of the Text* 183-209, for a detailed look at the evil connotations traditionally given to σάρξ and Jasper’s conclusions that the inherent contradictions within σάρξ point to “an actual and necessary bodily existence” rather than a clear elevation of the masculine divine to the detriment of a feminine humanity (209). In other words, she argues that the use of σάρξ in the Prologue is representative of multiplicity within human experience and that this multiplicity cannot be done justice by patriarchal dualisms (197).

<sup>118</sup> See C.K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (London: SPCK, 1982) 105-13, for a discussion of paradox and dualism in John’s prologue. Barrett argues that Jesus is the connecting point or point of intersection between God and human beings. He himself, because of his nature, is an embodiment of X.

is inherently both deconstructive and reconstructive, for it is through this point of intersection that one can see the interdependence between Word and flesh, God and human.<sup>119</sup>

Incarnation is a way to talk about moments of crossing while living in the world, of constantly becoming and re-becoming human, that can occur by means of a relationship of X-change, which is really a relationship of love. Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* is a meditation on the incarnational nature of X-change between lovers, reader and text, writer and text, between one-self and an-other.<sup>120</sup> The narrator relays stories of the many relationships in which s/he<sup>121</sup> partook, thereby acquiring the experience and knowledge necessary to authentically appreciate and engage in the incarnational love affair with Louise, her/his true beloved. Part of the narrator desires Incarnation all along (the other part either eludes relationships with any depth, purposely picking rather surface relationships), but it is only with Louise that it is both achieved<sup>122</sup> and subsequently lost. The narrator takes it upon her/himself to separate her/himself from Louise in the name of her own good, for Louise's husband informs her/him that Louise has leukemia but could possibly be saved if she began treatment immediately (under his own care, for he is a cancer specialist). Thus is the end of their "physical" relationship, but not the end of the narrator's love for her. S/he devotes her/himself to the study of the body and cancer's effect on each of its systems. The narrator physically lets go of Louise, but never mentally or emotionally.

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. *The Shining Garment of the Text* 177-9.

<sup>120</sup> See Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature* 67 a discussion of laughter and cheer accompanying writing or talk about sex: "The cheerful state of mind that accompanies talk about sex may therefore be understood not only as impatient anticipation of the hoped-for happiness, but also as a recognition of the boundary that is about to be crossed, of entry into a space that is different, paradoxical, and 'sacred'."

<sup>121</sup> The narrator never reveals both her/his name and sex to the reader; thus, I use both the masculine and feminine pronouns together when speaking about the narrator. However, considering the body of Winterson's writings as a whole, as well as the representation of the narrator's character in *Written*, I always place the feminine pronoun before the masculine because I think it is more true to the character. Cf. Laura Reed-Morrisson, rev. of *Written on the Body*, by Jeanette Winterson. *Chicago Review* 40.4 (1994): 101. Reed-Morrisson uses the feminine pronoun throughout her review for the same reasons I cite.

<sup>122</sup> See, for example, Winterson 20: "Louise, in this single bed, between these garish sheets, I will find a map as likely as any treasure hunt. I will explore you and mine you and you will redraw me according to your will. We shall cross one another's boundaries and make ourselves one nation. Scoop me in your hands for I am good soil. Eat of me and let me be sweet." Notice that reading and writing metaphors bring out the crossing/Incarnation of the two lovers. See below for an in-depth discussion of these metaphors.

Is it correct to speak of gaining and losing Incarnation in the way we speak of gaining and losing love? We can, when we think in terms of becoming and re-becoming (human), of understanding but faltering in spite of the possession of knowledge, of participating in the Fall but recognizing creation along with destruction and the need for constant struggle (reading and re-reading, writing and re-writing). As it turns out, the narrator's most poignant lesson is one of ethics, for s/he realizes that because a dialogical or love relationship necessarily involves both one and an-other, betrayal of the inherent mutual dependence (i.e., inter-dependence) by one without the other inevitably leads to rupture and scarring which cannot be erased, only (once again) read and understood and upheld as a reminder of responsibility of one to an-other, gain and loss, deconstruction and reconstruction within X-change. In her/his joy at finally gaining Incarnation, the narrator forgets that along with gain is always the possibility of loss. S/he cannot be blamed for forgetting; s/he can only keep (trying to) re-member(ing).

John's Prologue is present as both pre-text and subtext throughout this reading and writing of *Written on the Body*. It is also, perhaps, the pretext, or reason, that I myself discovered the Incarnation reinscribed throughout the entirety of this provocative novel. Let us now turn to Winterson and explore what is at stake within (and without) the X-change between lovers as Incarnation.

### **Desire as governing body**

Winterson's *Written on the Body* demonstrates that the journey of becoming and re-becoming (human) as represented by the incarnational X-change between lovers involves many different realities: such as pain, responsibility, reading, writing, faith, life, death, creation, destruction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. The entire process of X-change, which occurs through recognition, inter-action, and inter-passion, is primarily governed by desire, for desire is the



initial reason that one deems an encounter with an-other advantageous or even necessary.<sup>123</sup> In other words, desire is the motivating factor for a reader to embark upon an X-change with a text. Desire causes reader and text to recognize inter-dependence and accordingly engage in both interaction and inter-passion. Consider the following reflection on desire from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*:

Civilization is not merely an imitation of nature, but the process of making a total human form out of nature, and it is impelled by the force that we have just called desire. The desire for food and shelter is not content with roots and caves: it produced the human forms of nature that we call farming and architecture. Desire is thus not a simple response to need, for an animal may need food without planting a garden to get it, nor is it a simple response to want, or desire *for* something in particular. It is neither limited to nor satisfied by objects, but is the energy that leads human society to develop its own form. Desire in this sense is the social aspect of what we met on the literal level as emotion, an impulse toward expression that would have remained amorphous if the poem had not liberated it by providing the form of its expression. The form of desire, similarly, is liberated and made apparent by civilization. The efficient cause of civilization is work, and poetry in its social aspect has the function of expressing, as a verbal hypothesis, a vision of goal of work and the forms of desire.<sup>124</sup>

Frye is quick to rescue desire from the potential accusation that it is merely a basic, selfish instinct used to acquire objects (or people) for oneself. On the contrary, he argues, desire is the impetus behind human beings' actions and passions which produce entities (such as architecture

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<sup>123</sup> See *The Shining Garment of the Text* 177-82, where Jasper argues that God's position in the Prologue could be read as one of "a divine desire for birth and for deliverance from inarticulateness that, in effect, can only be achieved through relatedness and mutual dependence," (179). Jasper points to the presence of John the Baptist as mother, or one who gives birth to, the divine *logos*. Both God and the narrator need John the Baptist as witness because they desire the message (of Incarnation) to be heard by men and women.

and poetry) that surpass utility and illustrate aesthetics. A human being desires, thus works (recognizes, inter-acts, inter-passes) so that s/he might engage in *poiesis*, or art-making, which is essentially the process of X-change, or love.

Winterson's (pre-Louise) narrator's thoughts on desire are comparable to Frye's, only s/he approaches the subject from a slightly different direction.

What are the characteristics of living things? At school, in biology I was told the following: Excretion, growth, irritability, locomotion, nutrition, reproduction and respiration. This does not seem like a very lively list to me. If that's all there is to being a living thing I may as well be dead. What of that other characteristic prevalent in human things, the longing to be loved? No, it doesn't come under the heading Reproduction. I have no desire to reproduce but I still seek out love...I don't want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new.<sup>125</sup>

Like Frye, the narrator rejects the idea that life or human existence consists of performing strictly utilitarian functions. S/he immediately pushes beyond the solely functional and points to "the longing [i.e., desire] to be loved" as both basic and creative(/destructive), or poetic. Furthermore, with the narrator's denial that the practice of reproduction includes the desire to be loved, s/he not only takes a jab at the typically heterosexual compulsion toward procreation but also advocates Incarnation through the X-change relationship between lover and beloved. To use Frye's terminology, love and sex as modes of living in the world require *work* in the form of *poetry* in order to jar the empyreal from within the mundane.

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<sup>124</sup> from Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1986) 50-1.

<sup>125</sup> Winterson 108.

## Re-member(ing)

What constitutes this work in the form of poetry? What is involved in the process of becoming and re-becoming (human)? At the beginning of the novel, the narrator points to struggle, constantly questioning oneself and not becoming content (stagnant, satisfied with not-knowing) as the means to accomplish the work in the process of becoming and re-becoming (human).

Bigger questions, questions with more than one answer, questions without an answer are harder to cope with in silence. Once asked they do not evaporate and leave the mind to its serener musings. Once asked they gain dimension and texture, trip you on the stairs, wake you at night-time. A black hole sucks up its surroundings and even light never escapes. Better then to ask no questions? Better then to be a contented pig than an unhappy Socrates? Since factory farming is tougher on pigs than it is on philosophers I'll take a chance.<sup>126</sup>

Asking questions is work, and it is work which is necessary but painful for one engaged in dialogue/love/poetry with one's self and the world in which one lives. Questions, once voiced or actualized, become texts that read the one toward whom the question is directed. Once acknowledged (i.e., recognized as an-other to which my-self as listener/reader am responsible), questions demand attention (action or reading) and passion (silence or openness) so that they might effectively coax their audience (the reader/listener) to take them seriously, listen to and feel the weight of their gravity, willingly participating in the gaining of knowledge.

But why is Socrates unhappy? The one who questions (i.e., the one who presents the text) and the question itself (i.e., the text) are, in the final instance, helpless to force a listener/reader to hear and understand, as well as constructively and/or destructively contribute. It is my responsibility as listener/reader to hear and understand, as well as constructively and/or destructively contribute, but I falter. I must constantly re-member.

## The narrator's mistaken identity

The narrator's one fault is that s/he is forgetful; s/he does not constantly re-member. Since s/he is the story-teller, it is her/his voice which is superimposed over everyone else's in the novel. The story comes from her/him; s/he is in the center and everything else exists because it flows out of her/him. Though I do not think that s/he does so intentionally or maliciously, s/he falls into the role of "author," in the sense that s/he is accustomed to being in control within the relationships in her/his life and of the way s/he portrays them to her/his audience, the reader. S/he invariably fluctuates between the two poles (or posts) of keen self-awareness and obliviousness concerning motives of thoughts, actions, and passions.

Let me explain further what I mean by "author" through a brief discussion of the incongruity between the concepts of "authority" and "intertextuality" (i.e., interdependence and interrelation among all texts), for recognition of intertextuality is what makes X-change both desirable and possible. The notion of intertextuality leads to questions concerning seemingly unquestionable claims to authority (or author as one with authority) and/or originality within texts. For example, in the foreword to Mikail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, Krystyna Pomorsha speaks about Bakhtin's concept of "quoted speech:"

...we are actually dealing with someone else's words more often than our own...someone else's speech makes it possible to generate our own and thus becomes an indispensable factor in the creative power of language.<sup>127</sup>

Since dialogue is already present within texts, and since language constantly recalls already-existing language in the form of ideas, etc., claims to authority and/or originality deny the essential intertextuality of texts.

The 'authoritarian word' does not allow any other type of speech to approach and interfere with it. Devoid of any zones of cooperation with other types of words,

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<sup>126</sup> Winterson 13.

<sup>127</sup> Bakhtin ix.

the 'authoritarian word' thus excludes dialogue. Similarly, any official culture that considers itself the only respectable model dismisses all other cultural strata as invalid or harmful.<sup>128</sup>

Bakhtin recognizes the richness of (inter)textuality as dialogical in basis; thus, claims to authority within a text (or by the writer of a text who thinks her/himself author but who is a text her/himself) are, or must be, ultimately to the detriment of the text. In other words, since claims to authority usually (perhaps inevitably) involve *agon* with both predecessors and contemporaries, the "authoritarian word," as Bakhtin puts it, only harms itself by pitting itself against all others and refusing to recognize and celebrate multiplicity.<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, if I think myself author and original, I believe that no other has influenced me, that I ultimately stand alone and apart from all others. This attitude prohibits me from learning and re-learning, becoming and re-becoming, for I alone, without an-other or others, am stagnant and dull. I must constantly remember.

The narrator's authority complex manifests itself in several different ways. S/he describes her/himself as "the lover," as if the one in the pivotal position of the relationship, placing everything (everyone) else as wholly other. In addition, these relationships are oftentimes with married women; thus, the narrator has freedom of voice, action, and movement in a way the married woman does not. If she is hiding the relationship from her husband (and in the narrator's experience, most do), she must wrap herself in lies, while the narrator is at liberty to hold her/himself accountable for her/his own actions, and s/he is critical of the one who does otherwise. Thus, s/he is almost automatically critical of any married woman who becomes

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<sup>128</sup> Bakhtin x. Pomorsha here is comparing Bakhtin's ideas concerning carnival within folk culture to his correlative idea of dialogue within the novel, for both carnival and dialogue are representative of multiplicity within their given structures.

<sup>129</sup> For other views on detrimental claims to authority, particularly male authors wielding the pen/penis as the instrument of authority, see Gilbert & Gubar 3-14, 46-47; Ledbetter 16, 131; Meese 146. For a discussion of power vs. authority in the Hebrew Scriptures, see Exum 136-142. For a cautionary statement against logocentric authority, see Cixous' preface to *The Hélène Cixous Reader* xviii: "Derridean deconstruction will have been the greatest ethical critical warning gesture of our time: careful! let us not .

her/his lover. Her/his reasoning behind her/his sometimes haughty and self-righteous attitude is as follows:

You think I'm trying to wriggle out of my responsibilities? No, I know what I did and what I was doing at the time. But I didn't walk down the aisle, queue up at the Registry Office and swear to be faithful unto death. I wouldn't dare. I didn't say, 'With this ring I thee wed.' I didn't say, 'With my body I thee worship.' How can you say that to one person and gladly fuck another? Shouldn't you take that vow and break it the way you made it, in the open air?<sup>130</sup>

When it comes to marriage, the narrator is sarcastic on three levels: toward the institution itself, the woman who has made the vow (who is now breaking that vow), and, especially, her/his own self for getting involved with the woman, thus in the marriage, in the first place (and yet again).

Did I say this has happened to me again and again? You will think I have been constantly in and out of married women's lumber-rooms. I have a head for heights it's true, but no stomach for the depths. Strange then to have plumbed so many.<sup>131</sup>

The irony in the final statement above, as well as the proclamation that s/he would never take a marriage vow, seems to point to her/his cognizance that s/he might continuously enter married women's lumber-rooms because any other (single woman's) would be too dangerous because of the possible profundity of X-change. In other words, married women are emotionally safe because the relationship and the love between them must inevitably remain somewhat superficial and repeatedly have the same ending, which is precisely an ending, a conclusion.

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be the dupe of logocentric authority. We are not 'pure' I. A gesture dictated by humility, and which recalls us to humility."

<sup>130</sup> Winterson 16.

<sup>131</sup> Winterson 17. The narrator seems to be of two minds. On the one hand, s/he desires Incarnation through an authentic love relationship with an-other (why else would s/he have had so many?). On the other hand, s/he enjoys the exhilarating feeling that affairs give her/him, but s/he avoids a true X-change because of the intensity and responsibility of it all. For a parallel statement concerning the X-change relationship a writer has with the her/himself, cf. Hélène Cixous, "Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing,"

Through her/his relationship with Jacqueline the narrator seeks to amend her/his noncommittal ways, for Jacqueline is a single woman. She is still a safe choice for the narrator, however, for s/he does not fear falling in love with her, though Jacqueline rapidly becomes attached to her/him.<sup>132</sup> In this way, the narrator's detachment gives her/him power and authority over Jacqueline, for she, opening herself up while the narrator remains closed, is in a vulnerable position. Once again, I am not accusing the narrator of malicious behavior, although I do think s/he is unthinking and insensitive in this case.

S/he tries over and over to convince her/himself that the indifference s/he often feels toward their relationship is the way one is supposed to feel once one is settled into a routine. As the narrator puts it, "...passion is for holidays, not homecoming."<sup>133</sup> S/he does not relinquish her "simple and ordinary,"<sup>134</sup> practically uncomplicated arrangement, for it keeps her/him from jumping in and out of affairs with married women. It is only when s/he meets Louise that her/his flimsy foundation immediately crumbles under the force of Louise's demanding presence.

The narrator finds her/himself quickly obsessing over Louise and spending more and more time with her, in spite of Louise's marriage of ten years.<sup>135</sup> At first, because of her/his sense of duty towards Jacqueline and her/his pledge to stay away from married women, the narrator attempts to deny her/his feelings. S/he is moderately successful (for a short time only) until s/he can no longer avoid facing the truth.

My careful well-earned life means nothing...I know exactly what's happening  
and I know too that I am jumping out of this plane of my own free will. No, I

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*The Helène Cixous Reader* 203-6. Cixous also argues that it is more difficult to go down deep than to climb high.

<sup>132</sup> Winterson 26-8.

<sup>133</sup> Winterson 27.

<sup>134</sup> Winterson 27.

<sup>135</sup> Winterson 28-32.

don't have a parachute, but worse, neither does Jacqueline. When you go you take one with you.<sup>136</sup>

The narrator realizes that s/he cannot be with Jacqueline when every bit of her/him desires every bit of Louise. S/he also recognizes her/his authority over Jacqueline, knowing she is impotent and unprotected, for there is nothing Jacqueline can do to stop the narrator and Louise being together, and there is no way for her to shield herself from the blow. What the narrator does not yet fully comprehend, however, is that her/his choice to be with Louise is really a non-choice, for s/he has been called and must obey.<sup>137</sup> Thus, when the narrator speaks of acting of her/his own "free will," s/he is not entirely correct. Louise has made the mark/the narrator has been marked. S/he later ends her/his current stream of thought with "I am drowning in inevitability,"<sup>138</sup> thereby indicating that s/he has a sense of where her/his authority ends and textuality begins, that s/he has read the mark and sees her/his fate.

When the narrator finally tells Jacqueline about her/himself and Louise, her/his thoughts imply that s/he (thinks s/he) holds total authorial rights in their relationship.

'Are you seeing her?' Jacqueline's timid voice....I mumbled something about yes as usual but things had changed. THINGS HAD CHANGED, what an arsehole comment, I had changed things. Things don't change, they're not like the seasons moving on a diurnal round. People change things. There are victims of change but not victims of things. Why do I collude in this mis-use of language? I can't make it easier for Jacqueline however I put it. I can make it a bit easier for me and I suppose that's what I'm doing.<sup>139</sup>

S/he may be, at moments, aware of her/his limitations in the face of Louise, but this does not stop her/him from asserting control over Jacqueline and also hiding her/his own weakness from her.

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<sup>136</sup> Winterson 39.

<sup>137</sup> See Altizer, *Self-Embodiment* 56: "Only hearing is possible in the presence of judgment, and that hearing hears call as command."

<sup>138</sup> Winterson 40.



It's as if s/he wears a gauzy veil and is mostly able to see clearly, but now and again, her/his sight is blurred, fuzzy.

‘What are you going to do?’

‘It's for us to decide that. It's a joint decision.’

‘You mean we'll talk about it and you'll do what you want anyway.’

‘I don't know what I want.’<sup>140</sup>

Even after s/he reprimands her/himself for not simply coming clean with Jacqueline, s/he continues to be evasive. Jacqueline is right. The narrator made her decision prior to their meeting, and conversation at this point is utterly useless.<sup>141</sup>

A couple of days later, Jacqueline herself dispenses with (verbalized)<sup>142</sup> words and wildly confronts Louise and the narrator in the her/his flat. Jacqueline attempts to throw a glass at Louise, but the narrator grabs her wrists and prohibits her. The narrator handles her roughly, insists that she leave, and slaps her across the face, physically punctuating her/his petulance. Once again, the narrator acts with authority first, then immediately regrets this decision, but does not revise her/his hasty scribble.

‘Out,’ I said, still holding her. ‘Give me the keys and get out.’ It was as if I'd never cared for her at all. I wanted to wipe her away. I wanted to blot out her blazing stupid face. She didn't deserve this, in a corner of my mind I knew it was my weakness not hers that had brought us to this shameful day. I should

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<sup>139</sup> Winterson 56-7.

<sup>140</sup> Winterson 58.

<sup>141</sup> The narrator's decision to terminate their relationship without Jacqueline's input foreshadows her/his same actions with Louise. See below for further discussion.

<sup>142</sup> Incidentally, Jacqueline is able to take only one opportunity to assert herself as writer by ransacking the narrator's flat, leaving her mark all over the bathroom walls. “Pasted like an acid-house frieze around the ceiling was Jacqueline's name over and over again. Jacqueline colliding with Jacqueline. An endless cloning of Jacquelines in black ink...Staring blearily back at the bathroom door I saw it had SHIT daubed across it. The word and the matter. That explained the smell,” (70).

have smoothed things down, parried, instead I slapped her across the face and tore my keys from her pocket.<sup>143</sup>

S/he wields an eraser as well as a pen, expunging Jacqueline's resistance and replacing thoughtfulness with malice. The narrator forgets to constantly re-member that s/he embodies both reader/writer and text. S/he is too much taken with authority; s/he lets it carry her/him away.<sup>144</sup> S/he recognizes her/his own lack of control in this situation, but fails to act (or pass) in accordance with this recognition. In addition, her/his excessive authoritative action obscures the passion to which s/he is unwittingly submitting; s/he cannot see her/his own body-text onto which Louise has already begun signing (carving) her name.<sup>145</sup>

### **Louise as X**

Because the narrator has never experienced an X-change in quite the way s/he does with Louise, Louise serves to deconstruct and reconstruct notions concerning the position of lover and beloved, author and text, reader/writer and text.<sup>146</sup> Louise's presence in the narrative as beloved does not neatly oppose the narrator's role as lover. Louise does not conform to the expectations of the beloved, the one who (only) is-loved or acted upon by an-other, nor does she confirm the narrator's distaste for married women. She herself is the embodiment of X; she is complete in and of herself.<sup>147</sup> She is simultaneously reader and text, writer and blank page, lover and beloved, action and passion, control and lack of control. While she demonstrates the power of text to read and write upon an-other, Louise also, as a victim of cancer and mis-communication, illustrates the

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<sup>143</sup> Winterson 86.

<sup>144</sup> After Jacqueline drives away, s/he admits the following: "Why had I hit her? I'd always prided myself on being the superior partner, the intelligent sensitive one who rated good manners and practised them. Now I'd shown myself to be a cheap thug in a scrap," (86-7). S/he resolves to do better with Louise, to learn the lesson from this experience. As we shall see, the narrator is a slow learner.

<sup>145</sup> See Winterson 118: "...the L that tattoos me on the inside is not visible to the naked eye."

<sup>146</sup> See Lindenmeyer 56. She points out that "power relations" are kept in check through the protagonists' lovemaking, as with Winterson 163: "Neither of us had the upper hand, we wore matching wounds." Thus, the lovemaking between deconstructs and reconstructs the notions of penetrator and penetrated between lover and beloved.

absolute helplessness of the text to both write itself and demand that its reader listen, hear, and understand what it presents (as well as what it absents or leaves out).<sup>148</sup>

It is a couple of days after the narrator and Louise get together that Louise reveals that their meeting was not by accident.<sup>149</sup> Having seen the narrator in a park a long time before, Louise was captivated by her/him and could not stop thinking about her/him. After she came upon her/him a second time, at the British Library,<sup>150</sup> Louise bribed the security guard to find out who the narrator was, and then devised a way to meet her/him. Thus, it is from the very start of their relationship that Louise is the initiator of both action and passion. To a certain degree, she strips choice away from the narrator, forcing and enforcing the encounter between them. The narrator, of course, is not completely choiceless; neither is Louise omnipotent. One could say, however, that she has the upper hand, her fingers wrapped comfortably around a pen.

Louise inscribes her position in reference to those around her. She sets her boundaries and puts the other characters, in this case her husband Elgin and the narrator, in the places she chooses for them. For example, after the narrator hits Jacqueline and sends her on her way, s/he apologizes to Louise, and Louise responds as follows: “‘You didn’t hit me.’ She turned to me, her full lips in a long straight line. ‘If you ever do hit me I shall leave you.’”<sup>151</sup> Emphatically, and without question, Louise draws the line. In much the same way, she decides to leave Elgin, “‘I’m going to leave him because my love for you makes any other life a lie.’”<sup>152</sup> Louise makes

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<sup>147</sup> See Winterson 131, where the narrator speaks of Louise’s completeness: “You sleep with your back towards me so that I will know the full extent of you. It is sufficient.”

<sup>148</sup> See Lindenmeyer 57 for an interesting reading of colors of Louise’s body (‘creamy but for your hair your red hair’ Winterson 11) as the colors of femininity (red and white connoting menstrual blood and mother’s milk). These colors are associated with life-giving qualities as well as indicating her mortality, “because the corporeality of human beings that are ‘of woman born’ renders them vulnerable to death.” This example is yet another way Louise is ambivalent, embodying X.

<sup>149</sup> Winterson 68, 84-5.

<sup>150</sup> The narrator is a translator by profession and does a good bit of work in the British Library.

<sup>151</sup> Winterson 87.

<sup>152</sup> Winterson 98. Here their love is untainted and without limits, exposing every other love either of them have experienced as spurious; their love is the embodiment of the blank page. Cf. Winterson 82-3, where Louise first informs Elgin of hers and the narrator’s affair, which is, incidentally, the day after the first night they were together. Louise refuses to hide her affair from Elgin. She tells him that she will freely see the narrator and will always be honest with him about the direction or status of their relationship; that is,

truth-claims with certainty and follows them through without flinching. Unlike the narrator, her actions and passions match up with her thoughts.

Louise is adept at writing on the surface of the narrator's body, marking her/his flesh and making it her own. She also reads the narrator, bending her/his spine so that she can examine every crevice.

Articulacy of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body  
body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to  
use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my  
shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become  
printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body.  
Your morse code interferes with my heart beat. I had a steady heart before I met  
you, I relied upon it, it had seen active service and grown strong. Now you alter  
its pace with your own rhythm, you play upon me, drumming me taut.<sup>153</sup>

The narrator, in turn, is helpless to do anything but read Louise over and over on the grafted surface that used to be her/his own flesh. Several times throughout the course of their relationship, Louise repeats the statement "I will never let you go,"<sup>154</sup> which haunts the narrator, and holds true to its word. The lover (whether s/he wants to or not) becomes part of the beloved because text affects reader/writer when it opens its world to her/him.

I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much,  
tell the whole story. I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands. She  
has translated me into her own book.<sup>155</sup>

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both hers and the narrator's and hers and Elgin's. Louise's immediate honesty contributes to the possibility of hers and the narrator's love as the pure, unmarred blank page.

<sup>153</sup> Winterson 89. Cf. Lindenmeyer 46, 55 for a discussion of the protagonists bodies as "Foucaultian" in the sense that they are inscribed by 'history's destruction of the body'. However, Lindenmeyer argues that since the protagonists' bodies are "changed and translated, the body is no longer a mere passive object of inscription by an all-powerful history" (55). History as well as bodies are subject to the multiplicity of perception(s).

<sup>154</sup> Winterson 69, 76, 96, 100.

<sup>155</sup> Winterson 89.

The one who is accustomed to translating is translated. The writer is written upon. The reader is read. Here lies the inescapable nature of X-change.<sup>156</sup>

The flip-side of Louise as X reveals her own textual passivity, her own defenselessness in the face of the author outside her-self, which also happens to be part of herself, for this author is her own cancerous body.

‘Cancer is an unpredictable condition. It is the body turning upon itself. We don’t understand that yet. We know what happens but not why it happens or how to stop it.’<sup>157</sup>

The beloved cannot love herself into remission; the text cannot re-write itself, correcting the inconsistencies and discarding the rough draft. All Louise has is her own will to live and fight in whatever ways she is able. All she needs is for the narrator to be with her, to support her through her illness and believe that they can survive together. She can control her own will but cannot control the narrator. The text cannot force the reader/writer to believe what it presents.

Unfortunately for Louise, Elgin approached the narrator before Louise (seemingly) even thought about telling her/him about the leukemia.<sup>158</sup> Unfortunately for the narrator, Elgin’s picture of Louise’s illness is far more grave than her own,<sup>159</sup> forcing the narrator to (desperately) choose in whom to place her faith. Elgin tells the narrator that Louise’s only chance is to go with him to Switzerland so that she can be treated with the latest technology. Any other doctor could not offer her the same promise. Louise, on the other hand, says that she doesn’t trust Elgin, does not want to go back to him, and is confident that she, now in an asymptomatic stage, will be fine in the care of another doctor. Furthermore, she herself already knows a lot about the disease and wants the narrator to learn. No matter who is right, the narrator feels that Louise’s life is in

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<sup>156</sup> See Winterson 129-30 for lover reading her/his own body where the beloved has left her mark; cf. 131 for the beloved’s body (shoulder blades) being sharp as knives, cutting the imprudent lover; cf. 131 for lover crucified upon the body of the beloved and riding upon the beloved’s body as if it were a nightmare or a Pegasus, a winged horse.

<sup>157</sup> Winterson 105.

<sup>158</sup> Winterson 100-02.

her/his hands; thus, the choice s/he must make is really a non-choice. Louise promises hope and love while Elgin promises (the possibility of) life. Here again, the narrator is endowed/endows her/himself with an authority complex,<sup>160</sup> listening to Elgin and not hearing Louise. S/he decides to leave Louise.<sup>161</sup> Another victory for modern technology.

### **Incarnation, separation, and decay**

The narrator writes a love letter to Louise, telling her goodbye and asking her forgiveness for leaving her in Elgin's care. Within this letter are multiple layers of the reading and writing metaphors I have discussed thus far, as well as the narrator's recognition of the love between her/himself and Louise as incarnational. What the narrator still lacks, but will soon find out, is the full knowledge of how the destruction of this Incarnation between one and another, her/himself and Louise, will affect her/him. Almost immediately after the narrator separates her/himself from Louise, s/he begins to decay, experiencing death through her/his non-life without the presence of Louise (or, because of the absence of Louise).

In the letter, the narrator compares Louise's illness to a "sheer rock face"<sup>162</sup> they have encountered and, knowing that they could climb it together, s/he chooses not to because "it would be you [i.e., Louise] who took the strain."<sup>163</sup> S/he repeats the same idea in the next paragraph: "If I stay it will be you who goes, in pain, without help. Our love was not meant to cost you your life. I can't bear that."<sup>164</sup> Thus, as I previously stated, the narrator disregards Louise's claim to knowledge of her sickness, as well as her wishes to remain with the narrator and be treated by a

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<sup>159</sup> Winterson 103-04.

<sup>160</sup> See Winterson 102 & 105. The narrator did not wholly invent her/his personal responsibility in this situation. Elgin tells her/him twice that s/he alone can save Louise, for Louise will not save herself (by relenting and putting herself under his care).

<sup>161</sup> This is the final step in the series of events which marks/mars the blank page of their romance, defacing or changing its (sur)face forever. The first step is Louise's withholding of the knowledge of her illness from the narrator; the second is Elgin's revelation of the news to the narrator; and the final step is the narrator's decision to leave in spite of Louise's wishes to the contrary.

<sup>162</sup> Winterson 105.

<sup>163</sup> Winterson 105.

<sup>164</sup> Winterson 105.

doctor other than her husband. Although I do not think that the narrator is fully aware of the reasons behind her/his leaving, it seems as though with her/his departure from Louise, s/he also sheds responsibility for Louise's living or dying. S/he does not want Louise's blood on her/his hands, and this is the only way s/he can ensure her/his own sense of blamelessness.

The last paragraph of the letter is the most telling one, to be sure. S/he begins by asking (almost begging) Louise to go with Elgin, for s/he is not certain that her/his leaving will actually make Louise follow the rest of her/his plan. Once again, Louise is complete in and of herself and will either act or let herself be (passed) accordingly.

Your hand prints are all over my body. Your flesh is my flesh. You deciphered me and now I am plain to read. The message is a simple one; my love for you. I want you to live. Forgive my mistakes. Forgive me.<sup>165</sup>

The narrator wants her to live but does not want to feel responsible for her death, for s/he would take responsibility whether it is really hers/his to bear or not. Louise is depicted as both reader and writer in this passage, and the narrator is most definitely the author but fails to see the writing on the wall. S/he and Louise are one, and physical separation will only adversely affect the Incarnation. The narrator writes earlier in the letter: "If it could be my life I would gladly give it,"<sup>166</sup> for s/he does not realize that it already is her/his life s/he is giving. When s/he leaves Louise, s/he loses her/himself, for the narrator has become Louise, and Louise has become the narrator.

The narrator takes the train to Yorkshire and settles on both the first job and place to stay that s/he comes across. The cottage is dirty and in great disrepair, a perfect complement to the newly broken narrator. S/he sits in an armchair by the hearth, allowing her/his first thoughts to come since s/he boarded the train.

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<sup>165</sup> Winterson 106.

<sup>166</sup> Winterson 105.

I want to rot here, slowly sinking into the faded pattern, invisible against the dead roses. If you could see through the filthy windows you'd see just the back of my head bulging over the line of the chair. You'd see my hair, sparse and thinning, greying, gone. Death's head in the chair, the rose chair in the stagnant garden. What is the point of movement when movement indicates life and life indicates hope? I have neither life nor hope. Better then to fall in with the crumbling wainscot, to settle with the dust and be drawn up into someone's nostrils. Daily we breathe the dead.<sup>167</sup>

Our daily bread becomes the daily dead, for bread would be sustenance and life. Without Louise, life gives itself over to death, for the narrator has nothing left to live for. S/he fed on Louise, consuming her presence for vital nutrition. In the wake of Louise's absence, the narrator begins to decay, a dusty and neglected book disintegrating without the care of its reader.

Even when s/he tries to sleep, s/he is confronted by the glare of the blank page, the smooth surface of the sheets where Louise used to lay. "[T]he bed is continent-broad. There is endless white space where you won't be...The bed is empty. I'm in it but the bed is empty."<sup>168</sup> S/he resolves to mark the space of the blank page, to fill its deafening silence in an attempt to once more gain her/his life by creating an effigy of Louise through the study of the functions of the body, especially the leukemic body.

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<sup>167</sup> Winterson 107-8.

<sup>168</sup> Winterson 111. See Clara Mucci, "The Blank Page as Lacanian 'Object *a*': Silence, Women's Words, Desire, and Interpretation between Literature and Psychoanalysis," *literature and psychology* 38.4 (1992): 23-35. She discusses Isak Dinesen's "The Blank Page," arguing that the blank page is defined by "lack." In this way, it is similar to the Lacanian notion of "object *a*" which, according to Stuart Schneiderman, is: "a trace, a leftover, a remainder. We can summarize its concept by saying that it leaves something to be desired..." (31). Louise's absence, here symbolized by the blank page, leaves the narrator with this something left to be desired.



## Written within the body

Louise's repeated promise, "I will never let you go," resounds throughout this section of the novel, her hand guiding the narrator's pen, her voice calling the narrator outside her/himself, only to turn and see that s/he is not her/himself but Louise. Physical distance is no match for and no matter to Incarnation. Thus, through her/his study of the cancerous body, the narrator struggles to create a substitute dialogue for the one s/he has already destroyed by leaving Louise in spite of her desires to the contrary.

There are several levels of dialogue and non-dialogue which are present throughout the novel. From the beginning, the narrator speaks openly to us, the readers, as well as to her/his friends, usually concerning her/his lovers. The narrator and Louise were engaged in dialogue, up until the point where the narrator cut it off by leaving Louise in Elgin's care. Now, in the first entry of this section of the novel, the narrator writes generally about cancer:

In the secret places of her thymus gland Louise is making too much of herself. Her faithful biology depends on regulation but the white T-cells have turned bandit...It used to be their job to keep her body safe from enemies on the outside. They were her immunity, her certainty against infection. Now they are the enemies on the inside...Louise is the victim of a coup...The faithful body has made a mistake...Here they come, hurtling through the bloodstream trying to pick a fight. There's no-one to fight but you Louise. You're the foreign body now.<sup>169</sup>

Louise has become wholly other to herself. Her insides have turned on themselves. There is no room for, no possibility of communication, conversation, dialogue here. Cancer is non-dialogue. The narrator pleads in vain to be allowed to enter Louise's body and act as "keeper" of the gates, ensuring the renegade white blood cells are stopped in their paths and denied passage: "Let me

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<sup>169</sup> Winterson 115-16.

hold up my lantern.”<sup>170</sup> But s/he can do nothing except continue to study the disease and long to do more, as well as hope that s/he has done the right thing already (by leaving).<sup>171</sup>

Innocence, hope, and faith play significant roles in this novel. The body is innocent and has faith that it will not turn against itself. The beloved/text has faith that the lover will listen and hear her desires. The lover hopes and has faith that s/he has given the beloved a chance to live, whereas her/his continued presence would have surely meant death. The narrator even names a stray cat who arrived at her/his dilapidated cottage on her/his first night there Hopeful.<sup>172</sup> And all the while s/he is submerging her/himself in the study of Louise’s cancerous body, trying desperately to analyze it as something other to her/himself, as something from which s/he is apart, but s/he only succeeds in running into her/himself, head-on.

I dropped into the mass of you and I cannot find the way out. Sometimes I think I’m free, coughed up like Jonah from the whale, but then I turn a corner and recognise myself again. Myself in your skin, myself lodged in your bones, myself floating in the cavities that decorate every surgeon’s wall. That is how I know you. You are what I know.<sup>173</sup>

While exploring Louise’s body, the narrator is constantly confronted with her/himself, in addition to making claims of sameness, Incarnation.<sup>174</sup> Because they are now separated, the narrator also

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<sup>170</sup> Winterson 115; cf. 119-20 for the narrator as archaeologist, mountain climber, and speleologist, both marking (penetrating, mapping out, embalming, probing) and reading (examining, recording, analyzing) Louise’s body.

<sup>171</sup> See Lindenmeyer 56-7 where she confirms that no one, neither Elgin nor the narrator, establishes power over Louise’s body: “Against the concept of knowledge-as-power, Winterson posits the utopian concept of a mutual reading/translating/redrawing of the body which does align knowledge not to plunging the depths, but to touching – and changing – the surfaces.”

<sup>172</sup> See Winterson 111: “I named the cat Hopeful because on the first day he brought me a rabbit and we ate it with lentils. I was able to do some translating work that day and when I got back from the wine bar Hopeful was waiting by the door with an ear cocked and such a look of anticipation that for a moment, a single clear moment, I forgot what I had done.” Thus, Hopeful is hopeful because he is one way the narrator might regain a routine and semblance of normalcy. Forgetting brings peace of mind because of the absence of thought.

<sup>173</sup> Winterson 120.

<sup>174</sup> For examples of sameness/Incarnation, see Winterson 125, “...if you are broken then so am I”; 129-30, “I thought difference was rated to be the largest part of sexual attraction but there are so many things about us that are the same. Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh. To remember you it’s my own body I touch”;

writes much about holes, spaces and voids which evoke the grave, death.<sup>175</sup> S/he refers to faith and death as “bitter cousin[s],”<sup>176</sup> for her/his faith in her/his actions and Louise’s health is, at times, as dark and narrow as both death and the grave. “Your face gores me. I am run through. Into the holes I pack splinters of hope but hope does not heal me.”<sup>177</sup> The problem is that s/he does not know what will heal her/him, apart from being with Louise again, but this is not all. S/he must see what s/he has done. S/he must have an ethical revelation, but s/he cannot do it on her own; s/he needs help.

In the last entry of this section, s/he concludes on a prayerful note, imploring Louise to “restore...[her/his] sight”;<sup>178</sup> only it is not Louise who will reverse her/his blindness. The narrator must be sacrificed; author must be authored, and it must come from without. It cannot be Louise because Louise is always already within. Thus enters Gail.

### **Sacrifice and salvation**

Gail is the narrator’s boss at the restaurant where the narrator works after s/he moves near Yorkshire. Gail is quite attracted to the narrator, but s/he does not feel the same. Nevertheless, they develop a friendship, and Gail invaluablely serves as a voice of brute honesty, for she has no reason to speak otherwise and feels she has nothing left to lose.

One night after Gail has more than her share to drink, she decides to tell the narrator exactly what she thinks about her/his whole situation. The narrator, also having nothing else to lose at this point, is in the perfect position to hear her and take her seriously.

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132, “Of the visions that come to me waking and sleeping the most insistent is your face. Your face, mirror-smooth and mirror-clear. Your face under the moon, silvered with cool reflection, your face in its . . . mystery, revealing me.” Later, in the final section of the novel, when one of her/his co-workers tells her/him s/he must forget Louise, s/he responds, “I might as well forget myself,” (148). Cf. Lindenmeyer 53 for more examples of sameness (which she describes as “fusions”), such as Winterson 99 & 163. In addition, she asserts that the intensity of their love also causes “splittings” of the narrator’s self into various entities or personalities: ‘lover and child, virgin and roué....I had Mercutio’s swagger....I quivered like a schoolgirl’ (Winterson 81-2).

<sup>175</sup> See Winterson 119-20, 132, 138, 174, 177.

<sup>176</sup> Winterson 136.

<sup>177</sup> Winterson 132.

‘I got something to tell you kiddo,’ she said leaning down at me the way a zoo keeper drops a fish at a penguin. ‘Want it?’ There was nothing else to have. Magic Pete’s was an all-night drinking club, low on amenity, high on booze. It was Gail’s revelation or find 50p for the juke box. I didn’t have 50p. ‘You made a mistake...You shouldn’t have run out on her.’<sup>179</sup>

The narrator is initially shocked and confused by Gail’s accusatory statement. S/he had never before thought about her/his leaving Louise as “running out,” for, in her/his mind, s/he only did what was ultimately best for Louise at the cost of her/his own happiness. S/he retorts to her/himself, “Hadn’t I sacrificed myself for her? Offered my life for her life?”<sup>180</sup> S/he does not, however, answer these questions just now, for the s/he cannot immediately fathom the implications of their negative possibility. While Gail continues to throw out accusations (‘She wasn’t a child....You didn’t give her a chance to say what she wanted. You left.’), the narrator continues to defend her/himself in her/his own mind, but Gail wears her/him down. Parallel to God in Genesis 3,<sup>181</sup> Gail forces the narrator into the desert, where her/his footing is uncertain as the sand moves beneath her/him. Relinquishing her/his pride, s/he finally allows doubt to enter, “the worm of doubt” which burrows into her brain, destroying the narrator’s vision of her/himself as martyr and clearing a path for re-vision.<sup>182</sup>

With zero tact and drunken omniscience, Gail convinces the narrator to go back to London to try to find Louise. The narrator boards a train the next day. While in London, s/he makes contact with Elgin’s clinic in Switzerland, Elgin himself, and Louise’s mother and

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<sup>178</sup> Winterson 139.

<sup>179</sup> Winterson 159.

<sup>180</sup> Winterson 159. The following quotes in this paragraph are also taken from Winterson 159.

<sup>181</sup> The original version of this thesis contained a reading of Genesis 3.

<sup>182</sup> We have here another blank page, for the narrator’s previous idea of her/himself is erased. See Mucci 33: “The place where no meaning seems possible, the blank, becomes the place of all possible meaning, the representation *in absentia* of the impossibility of telling the story or of the performed erasure in the story. It becomes the symbol of the accomplished ‘self-expropriation’ in the story, the last word and the last desire, a desire of ‘nothing nameable,’ speaking through silence.” The possibility of re-incarnation is this “nothing nameable,” it manifests itself through the erasure of the narrator’s notion of her/himself as author.

grandmother but has no luck finding her.<sup>183</sup> Without Louise, s/he sees no reason to stay in London, so s/he decides to return to Yorkshire, leaving a note with her address, just in case Louise returns to the old flat. It is on the journey back to Yorkshire that s/he truly realizes what s/he did when s/he made the decision to leave Louise in Elgin's care and that, because of her/his actions, s/he might never see Louise again. S/he begins to despair, for s/he now recognizes the ethical gravity of not hearing Louise, as well as her/his own fear and stupidity in doing so.

Why didn't I hear you when you told me you wouldn't go back to Elgin? Why didn't I see your serious face?...Time has exposed to me a certain stickiness at the centre. What were my heroics and sacrifices really about? Your pig-headedness or my own?...Louise, stars in your eyes, my own constellation. I was following you faithfully but I looked down. You took me out beyond the house, over the roofs, way past commonsense and good behaviour. No compromise. I should have trusted you but I lost my nerve.<sup>184</sup>

Time and Gail are the great exposers within this novel, succeeding in demanding the narrator's attention where everyone (and everything) else fails. And the narrator, having learned her/his lesson, attends to the counsel of these prophets and finally knows and accepts fully her/his responsibility to the other both within and outside her/his-self: "The most significant thing is someone else's face."<sup>185</sup>

Thus, s/he recognizes the ethical lesson underlying this entire X-change, that there is a delicate balance between writer and author, love and control, and s/he now wants to fall on the side of writer. Gail agrees that s/he did not have the right to act with authority: "...you tried to

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<sup>183</sup> See Winterson 161-181. This moment is the navel of the novel as a whole, for it is from this moment that the narrator later sees that s/he was wrong to take the fate of s/he and Louise's relationship into her/his own hands (i.e., s/he realizes s/he was wrong to act as author instead of partner in dialogue). It is the destruction or death of her/his vision of her/himself as martyr, and the creation or birth of a re-vision of her/his responsibility as one text to an-other.

<sup>184</sup> Winterson 187.

<sup>185</sup> Winterson 189. What the narrator has experienced could also be thought of as a "death" in Lacanian terms. See Mucci 30: "By death Lacan means the radical de-centerment from one's own ego, the radical

[invent her]....She wasn't yours for the making.'"<sup>186</sup> Having erased and re-vised her/his previous thinking, s/he tells Gail that all s/he wants to do is to have the chance to tell Louise the truth about her previous fears and subsequent transcendence. The narrator has engaged in the process of becoming and re-becoming human. With the help of conversation/dialogue with both Gail and her/his own self, s/he has destroyed and recreated her/his position. To again draw from Genesis 3, s/he, like Adam and Eve, is forced into the desert, only to make it her/his own, cultivating it through the process of self-awareness in conjunction with one's self and an-other.

### Re-incarnation

The narrator's efforts pay off; s/he is awarded with Louise's immediate arrival at her/his kitchen door.

This is where the story starts, in this threadbare room. The walls are exploding. The windows have turned into telescopes. Moon and stars are magnified in this room. The sun hangs over the mantelpiece. I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is bundled up in this room. Beyond the door, where the river is, where the roads are, we shall be...I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields.<sup>187</sup>

Here is Irigaray's sensible transcendental, the re-completion of X, re-incarnation. Thus, the end of the novel is also the beginning, for it is the narrator's second chance at love and life. It is at this time, only after s/he has recognized her breach of inter-action and inter-passion, that s/he can fully embrace this moment, her/himself embodying the form of the chiasmus; thus, "I stretch out

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acceptance of one's own self-expropriation, as the recognition of the presence of the Other within oneself, and the discourse of this Other speaking through the subject."

<sup>186</sup> Winterson 189.

<sup>187</sup> Winterson 190. See Lindenmeyer 58-9 for a reading of the novel as within but also undoing the romantic tradition. She sees the ending of *Written* as holding a double meaning: "either Louise comes back paler, thinner, but alive, or the narrator descends into madness, the excessive fantasy expunging a deadly reality....Louise's death and imaginary resurrection would be a full enactment of the romantic plot, where a woman is killed off then transformed into a text, a fantasy, a work of art." Cf. Lindenmeyer 61

my hands and reach the corners of the world.” Furthermore, the narrator is no longer frightened of letting go and allowing love to carry them wherever it wills. S/he has relinquished the pretense to authority, control. S/he will know and abide by her/his lesson until s/he once again forgets, then re-members. The process of becoming and re-becoming (human) encompasses both the Fall and the Landing, deconstruction and reconstruction, reading/writing and re-visioning (i.e., re-visioning). Let loose in the open fields, sometimes I lose my bearings, but I can always re-orient my-self by looking into the eyes of an-other and allowing myself to see us both within.

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where she reads the ending as an “unfolding of possibilities,” which is parallel to becoming and re-becoming (human).

## Conclusions: Loving One and An-other

It's not the Fall that matters. It's the landing.

— *La Haine*

In the preface to Allen Ginsberg's section in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*,<sup>188</sup> Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair write about Ginsberg's travels in the East during the early sixties. One of the people Ginsberg consulted during this time was Martin Buber, who, according to the editors, "advised him to turn to relationships between one human being and another rather than relationships between the human and the nonhuman."<sup>189</sup> Ginsberg himself documents Buber's words as follows: " 'Mark my word, young man, in two years you will realize that I was right.' He was right—in two years I marked his words."<sup>190</sup> This scene perfectly exemplifies a post-theological poetics of agnosticism because it is concerned with relationships between one human being and an-other—living in the world, listening, learning, and loving. The recognition, action, and passion of Ginsberg and Buber make them readers and writers under the sign of the cross. As student to Buber and other teachers in the East,<sup>191</sup> Ginsberg erases himself, making himself into the blank page so that he might listen and receive their words. The words stay with him, and he reads until he understands. After this two year period, he is ready to make the mark because he understands. He makes the transition from reader to writer. And with a concentration on human relationships, he will always be both reader and writer—sometimes one, sometimes the other.

My goal in Chapter 1, "What do I read and write under the sign of the cross?," was two-fold. I first presented the notion of "text" as an embodied entity with whom or which I, as reader

<sup>188</sup> Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, eds, "Allen Ginsberg," *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: W. W. Norton, 1988) 1207-1223.

<sup>189</sup> Ellmann and O'Clair 1209.

<sup>190</sup> Thomas Clark, "Interview with Allen Ginsberg," *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Third Series* (New York 1967) 314. Rpt. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair, eds. (London: W.W. Norton, 1988) 1209.



and writer, engage in dialogue. I next demonstrated that the textual bodies with which I am engaging in dialogue are grotesque bodies because they are ambivalent. They occupy the space of both the womb and the grave, the material and the immaterial. The action and passion of dialogue is chiasmic, and as ambivalent texts, they are embodiments of X. Human beings too are ambivalent and embodied texts, thus grotesque. We live everyday in the world but are also ‘beings toward death’—everyday decaying, moving farther from the womb and closer to the grave. In addition, I myself as text cannot make sense of my-self living in this world without referring to an-other text (human being, environment, language, etc.).

With texts defined as the embodiment of X and the textual space as grotesque, I next asked the question, “How do I read and write under the sign of the cross?” I use recognition, inter-action, and inter-passion as a guide. I recognize the interdependence which is present between my-self and an-other because an-other is always already inside me. Language, for example, cannot read and write itself as I cannot read and write without language. Inter-action is encounter and activity between one and an-other. Inter-passion is receptivity and desire between one and an-other. I read and write so that I might change and be changed, learning from and contributing to the flow of meaning in the world.

In the third chapter, I performed a reading and writing of Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*. I offered up the Incarnation, John’s prologue (1.1-18), and Julia Kristeva’s notion of the *sujet en procès* as paradigms by which to understand the actions and passions of the characters in the story. I began with Alison Jasper’s reading of the Incarnation through the lens of Kristeva as a story about the drama of becoming and remaining human. I changed this phrase to “becoming and re-becoming (human)” to emphasize the presence of the Fall and the Landing within this process. The narrator of *Written* often falters. S/he forgets lessons s/he has already learned and finds her/himself harming both her/himself and others, though this is not what s/he

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<sup>191</sup> Ellmann and O’Clair 1209. The editors specifically mention Indian holy men who taught Ginsberg the same thing, the necessity of “living in and inhabiting the human form” (*Writers at Work* 315).

really desires. S/he desires love. Thus, s/he is constantly re-membering—allowing her/himself to be taught and retaught, rearranging her/his actions and passions according to her/his lessons learned. S/he must constantly re-member that the face of the beloved contains them both within. The relationship of X-change, which is also a relationship of love, between one and an-other makes possible creating the transcendental within the sensible, which is Incarnation.

I will conclude with a reflection on the following selection taken from “The Ambiguity of Love” in Emmanuel Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*:

Love remains a relation with the Other that turns into need, and this need still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority of the other, of the beloved. But love also goes beyond the beloved. This is why through the face filters the obscure light coming from beyond the face, from what *is not yet*, from a future never future enough, more remote than possible....The possibility of the Other appearing as an object of a need while retaining his alterity, or again, the possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time beneath and beyond discourse—this position with regard to the interlocutor which at the same time reaches him and goes beyond him, the simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and the unavowable, constitutes the originality of the erotic which, in this sense, is the *equivocal* par excellence.<sup>192</sup>

Levinas here depicts, far more eloquently than I’ve managed, the many paradoxes present within the actions and passions of love. I need and desire the beloved for reasons both known and unknown to me. And my need and desire is not only for the beloved him/herself but also goes beyond the beloved, transcends the beloved, to future encounters, future passions, future creations and destructions. In this move to the future, a future which both includes and transcends the

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<sup>192</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1969) 254-55.

beloved, the other is explicitly other and I am explicitly my-self, while, at the same time, we remain implicitly within one an-other. Thus, lover and beloved may, and probably do, have varying or ambiguous needs and desires, differing (and deferring) from one an-other at any rate. Thus, equivocalness between one and an-other, lover and beloved, requires an emphasis on self-sufficiency, a recognition that, while I am a part of the other, I am also apart from the other. I am different, I defer. The other is different, the other defers. Recognition of this quality of love is a recognition of multiplicity. Action and passion according to the recognition of multiplicity is simultaneously love of my-self and love of an-other because it respects the positions of alterity between my-self and an-other. I respect the otherness within my-self, and I embrace my individuality within my ambiguity. I respect the otherness within an-other, and I allow him/her room to breathe. I read and write because I love myself and I love an-other, and I love the multiple considerations in between.

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